

Turning to the Mystics



St. John of the Cross: Dialogue 2
with James Finley

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Kirsten Oates: Welcome everyone to another dialogue with Jim Finley on St. John of the Cross, our current mystic on Turning to the Mystics. Welcome, Jim.

Jim Finley: Good to be back with you.

Kirsten Oates: Good to be with you, very much. Well, I listened to session two. It's beautiful and there are a lot of wonderful quotes from John of the Cross in Lectio you offered and people will be able to read those in the show notes. I've copied a few of them myself. I wanted to start by asking you about what seems to be arising as the meta-theme of what St. John of the Cross is trying to teach us and what I'm hearing is that he's trying to help us understand the infinite love of God as a direct experience.

Jim Finley: Yes, that's a good place to start. So one of the themes in all of this is that love produces likeness and equality that we become like what we love. And so he's saying that center of faith teaches us that God is love. In fact, God is infinite love. When we experience something of God's infinite love for us and that love enters into our heart, it evokes within us a love for the infinite love. And it's our love for the infinite love that produces the likeness or equality between ourselves and God in love. And also, it produces an awareness of what it is, it's hindering that transformation into that equality, which is the mystical state really in love. So that's really the meta thing. That its theme underneath it all, is understanding the nature of love and infinite union with infinite love that's infinitely in love with us because God is love.

Kirsten Oates: And that transforms us into love.

Jim Finley: It transforms us into love because since God is love, who creates us in the image and likeness of love, then love is our origin, love is our nature, and love is our sustaining ground. So really, it's actualizing our God-given love nature, our God-given godly nature and being healed from all that hinders that actualization from occurring. So this love is transforming us into itself. We're being drawn out beyond all that hinders that transformation, which is a foretaste of heaven really, which is eternal life.

Kirsten Oates: That's really helpful. Thank you for clarifying that. And then Jim, John of the Cross uses find out experiences to point us to the infinite love. Is that how he goes about it? That's part of what you were reflecting on in this last session.

Jim Finley: Yes. There's different ways of approaching it. For example, let's say we start with the finite experience. Well, I will use the example, the one that he uses in nature, the midst of nature. And so he says that in the beginning, the beauty of nature can be seductive through possessiveness of heart, like we try to own it or have it. He said, "But when, say, we spend a day alone in the mountains," the way he puts it, we realized the beloved has passed this way in haste as we started seeing tracings of divinity and the contours of the mountains. So in the beginning of the concreteness of the mountains, or this is anything, the ocean, the smell of a

rose, the darkness of the night, a child's laughter, the beloved's face, and the concreteness, we get intimations of the love that's incarnating itself in that intimately realized experience.

Jim Finley: And then he says, "As the purification deepens through love, we realize," he says, walking in the mountain, "My beloved is the mountains. That's the infinity of the mountains, where the mountains are bodying forth the love of God." And so everything is seen as sacred. Everything is seen as divine in its concreteness, in its nothingness without God. It's God's manifested presence. And it was there all along, but I couldn't see it because my love was too myopic. It was too closed in for what I can have in my finite ego. But as I learned to pass beyond the frontiers of myself through love, this start shining through.

Kirsten Oates: Does that mean that that final, I am the mountain, is that the experience of infinite love that St. John of the Cross is inviting us to?

Jim Finley: Well, yes, it is. He said this, the God is the mountains and simultaneously and infinitely more besides, which is a mystery of God. So God's generosity is infinite. God infinitely gives Himself infinitely, infinitely gives Herself as the night, the mountains, the darkness, whatever. And that infinite generosity of giving, which we receive, God in that infinite giving remains infinitely more besides, which is what it means to be God. So in a way, it means while we're still on earth, it's really foreshadowings of paradise. Even though while we're still here, we're in this love that permeates everything about being here in some unexplainable way. It can become habitual.

Kirsten Oates: John of the Cross is inviting us to experience the fullness of love in the finite world, but the infusion of the infinite is part of that experience.

Jim Finley: Yes, yes. But I think it's like this, there's this Ornstein, there's this phenomenologist, this psychologist, he talks about the mandala, like gazing at a sacred object. So he say here the mandala is the mountain or the rose or the face of the beloved or the child or whatever it is. He said, "The thing is, the longer you gaze at it, the less obvious it gets." So in the gazing upon it with... and gazing is a sustained attentiveness, like a loving gaze. So through the love in the gaze, the gaze passes beyond the externals of the thing into the divinity of the thing that's revealing itself to us as precious. Something intimately realized.

Kirsten Oates: So for those of us on this path, drawn to this path, becoming more present at that finite level, introducing a loving gaze, this contemplative gaze into the way we look at... I'm looking at a tree outside my window or I know you've got the ocean outside of your window. Is that part of the way we can orient?

Jim Finley: It is. Here's my sense of it. Let's say when we hear talk like this, in some sense, we recognize which John of the Cross is talking about because we've all had moments. Like you say, the tree, the stone, the flower, the child, we've all had a moment, an awe moment. The setting sun, we've all had those little moments. In those moments, we're a momentary mystic. In that moment, we're momentarily in the intimate immediacy of the divinity, of myself in all things. It's like this unexplainably so. What John of the Cross is saying, "But notice how these realizations, which come to all of us in different ways, they tend to be fleeting. They tend to be fleeting because although they're very deep, they're also very delicate and subtle."

Jim Finley: And therefore, the customary preoccupations start to move on us again. The agenda at hand, the project, what I'm in the midst of, off we go again. So what he's saying is what we're looking for is a certain stirring of a longing in our heart to abide in the depths of fleetingly glimpsed. It's like this nuptial imagery of marital love is the symbol for this. That a person who begins to fall deeply in love with someone, they're not content with simply occasionally running into the person out on the road. They long to abide. So the thing is, if we could start to notice a longing for the abiding, which is the path, he's offering trustworthy guidance and how that longing might be actualized. Instead of these little fleeting touches, touches, touches, we might listen to the longing for the abiding union, which is an echo of God's infinite longing for us to abide. It's a foretaste of heaven. So how is that longing fulfilled? See, that's his teaching. What is the process by which we're healed from what hinders us from abiding in what's so fleetingly glimpsed?

Kirsten Oates: What John on the Cross is helping us with in terms of how we might stabilize in that, there's some passive components and there's some active components. In this section, we're actually looking at things we can do, effort we can take.

Jim Finley: Yeah. When we started out the very first talk on the three signs of noticing the onset of the night in meditation, we see there that it's essentially begins first as passive because God achieves it in us while we're sitting there reflecting and meditating, and God achieves it in us by a strange sense of being powerless to gratify a sense of God's presence in prayer because God's removing our ability to be gratified at the emotional level, because that's a finite way of experiencing God's infinite presence. So that might clear the way for an infinite gratification of infinite union beyond the finite.

Jim Finley: So now what he's talking about is how to take that insight and extend it throughout every moment of the day. Not just when I'm in prayer, but how can I actively cooperate with this ever so subtle love tugging at my heart, drawing me into itself. What are the habits that I can cultivate to stabilize in it? A contemplative the spiritual direction for this. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Fabulous. So just to help us understand them, what he's offering, the guidance he's offering, Jim, can you help me unpack the way St. John of the Cross talks about the soul, the senses, and the appetites?

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: I noticed in terms of the soul where he talks about it as a clean slate. I was a little confused by that.

Jim Finley: Let's look at that. Yeah, that'd be really good, okay. Let's say the soul is the interiority of ourself. That's our soul. We might say the soul is a God-given godly nature created by God in the image and likeness of God as the qualities of consciousness itself, presence itself. And in this consciousness of our soul, of the surrounding world, there are other senses. The senses are our capacity to be aware of and take into ourself sensory experience through the five senses, things we can touch, smell, taste, feel, and so on. And certain things that we experience through our senses derives pleasure.

Therefore, we seek to be at this. So the appetites are the five senses fueled with the desire for gratification. That's what they are.

Jim Finley: So what he's talking about then are inordinate appetites. At lower levels, we know inordinate appetite. You may say addiction is an inordinate appetite. We might say there's ways that we can desperately cling to try to have something to hold on to, the pleasure in that, there's all of that to be dealt with. But what he's saying is this, since the soul is a tabula rasa, that it's also blank tablet, tabula rasa, everything that comes into the soul, everything we internalizes, our ideas, our convictions, our understanding, our thought, our feeling, it all comes through the senses. It all comes to the senses. And since all the senses are finite, and since everything the senses perceive are finite, and since the pleasure that's given to us and the things that the senses perceive is finite, therefore, we cannot at the same time hold on to the level of gratification as our base of operation and clear the way for this infinite gratification of this infinite love like this.

Jim Finley: So we have to learn to let go of being gratified at that level by seeing that there's something about it that's infinitely less than what I'm looking for. It doesn't mean that it's not good. It doesn't mean the pleasure there isn't real because God created the pleasure, God created the thing. But because it's finite, we've been touched by a love, an infinite love, in which we have to liberate ourselves or let go of our attachment to that finite gratification to clear the way for an infinite gratification and that's a challenge because we're attached to our finite gratification. See, that's the thing. It's myopic. It's claustrophobic with respect to the great awakening, but we're dearly fond of it. You know what I mean? Which is truly funny. So this is a very subtle thing he's talking about here.

Kirsten Oates: Help me understand, how does God then impact the soul? If we make way, in the way you're describing, is that God finds God's way to our soul or God's already infused in the soul?

Jim Finley: Well, yes. We would say, first in a general sense, in this Christian context here, that God awakens the soul through faith. So through faith, we hear God loves us. Through the power of the spirit who dwells in our hearts, we're empowered to know that God does love us. So this faith in is this obscure certainty in our heart as in a mirror darkly. That God's one with us and with us through faith. We also know that the measure of this faith is love and that's how God comes into our heart. Now, John of the Cross is saying all that's true.

Jim Finley: But what's also true is, if with the eyes of faith, I'm sitting quietly and I turn to see a rose on the table. I can somehow see, in the presence of the rose, something of the presence of God and the beauty of the rose gratifies me. So I see, yes, the rose gratifies me. I smell the rose, it gratifies me. But I also know, shining through that gratification, is a call to an infinite gratification of the God who is lovingly creating the rose right at that moment and creating me smelling the rose right at that moment. So I begin to see that everything, the concreteness of things start shining through with the presence that calls me to acknowledge the gratification in the senses. But then I see that everything in the senses becomes translucent to this infinite love

shining through everything. So I'm called to go beyond that finite gratification that I can have to enter more deeply into the love that's shining through it. That's the subtlety of it, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, but the experience of that infinite connection to God is through the senses.

Jim Finley: That's right. He's going to say later in book two it's also through the mind, through faith. But right now, it's the first phase is... so it's called a night because it's a purgation because we're so attached to our customary finite gratification to be learned beyond it. But all love is like this, as we keep going here, any deep love where there is marriage for the child or for a classroom of students or for a community or the poet or the artist, the deeper the love gets, it asks of us nothing less than everything. How to love? We have to lean into it. We have to devote ourselves to it. There's a certain sacrifice at a certain level. That's asceticism. We're denied a certain level to be gratified at a deeper level. That's the artistry of the deepening of love.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And it's challenging because the vehicle for the finite gratification and the infinite gratification is the same vehicle, so you can't just turn in a whole different direction. It's a subtle shift within the same construct.

Jim Finley: That's right. And this is a critical chapter here in this is chapter 11 and he breaks us down bit by bit. What he's saying is, is that the hindrance to God is not the thing because God creates it. It's not the sensors, God creates it. It's not the pleasure, God creates it. All that's created by God. Nor is it the initial gratification that initially comes to the beauty of it, the pleasure of it. That's created by God. What he's talking about is a secondary reflection or secondary awareness that yes, it is so lovely, but it echoes with an infinite love. And therefore, if I close myself off and function at that level only, it's not enough for me. "That you made our hearts for Thee, oh Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee," Saint Augustan says.

Jim Finley: So we realized that and at a certain level, we hold in abeyance, functioning at the level of immediate gratification to keep the heart open for the infinite gratification subtly you're shining through it. And through that sustained activity of keeping an eye on our heart that way, the longing to abide in the infinite union grew stronger and stronger.

Kirsten Oates: Is it also true that we can't sustain gratification at that first level? It's fleeting. Where we started with this is, is that we might have that initial gratification or that moment, but it's fleeting, so even wanting to maintain at that level is challenging.

Jim Finley: This is my sense of it. That's a good point, really. Let's say there's that immediate sense of the presence of God shining through the gratification, the rose, the flower, the child, and it's fleeting. That is fleeting. We can't hold on to it. But the more we actively refrain from the clinging, the function at that level where we can have it, the presence of God shining through the sensory starts becoming an underlying habitual state of the way we see everything. The light starts shining through the night. That instead of becoming something fleeting, there's a subtle, underlying sensitivity to the depth or the divinity of the concreteness of things as sacraments of God, the sound of water, the darkness of the night, whatever. That's where he's heading, that's where he's taking us.

Kirsten Oates: Let's talk about some of the actions that he's encouraging us to take on the path. Part of it is to understand the habits within ourselves that hinder what you're describing, that openness that shut down the lens that's open to the infinite. Is that right, Jim?

Jim Finley: Let's say, first of all, that we're sitting with John of the Cross and there's some sense the things he's saying speak to us. Like we resonate with what he's saying. You sense the beauty of it or the depth of it, but because it's so subtle, we have to keep just sitting with it and the more that we sit with it, the clearer it gets. So what I want to reflect on here is in chapter 11 where he gravitates towards these clarifications. So I'd like to share some of the things it taught me. I shared in the talk that I gave on this experience that I had on a plane on John of the Cross.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, I was going ask you about that, actually, yeah.

Jim Finley: Yeah, on gratification of the senses' detachment. The attendance set down the coffee and my coffee was cold. So I ding, ding, ding.

Kirsten Oates: And it didn't have cream and sugar.

Jim Finley: It had no cream and sugar, yes. It was cold and no cream and sugar. It was not to my liking. I kept looking over my shoulder, you can't get any service around here, detachment from sensory gratification. Then I consciously saw what I was doing.

Kirsten Oates: Which is what? What would you describe you were doing?

Jim Finley: I was embarrassed because I was attached to my image of myself as someone who was detached from sensory gratification. Just some cold coffee ruined my flight. I was reading chapter 11 of St. John of the Cross and they're expecting me to give the retreat. I mean, what's going on around here? But I think this is a deeper layer from me that what happens when we listen to talk like this, the ego never tires. Everything is a goal to reach. Am I detached yet? Am I detached yet? Am I detached yet? So I realized on the plane that I was embarrassed because I became conscious of the fact that I was attached to my image of myself as a detached person. Am I detached yet? Am I detached yet? Because if only I could strive and get detached enough, then mystical union are a bust. I think I could pull this off. I think the deep attachment's about what this is really all about.

Jim Finley: See, Jesus says, "Who can be saved? With you as humans, it's impossible. With God, all things are possible." And what we're really doing is giving up our image of ourself. As someone on a path of getting the pegs in the holes and realizing degrees of union, degrees of... because it's actually my deep acceptance of my inability to live up to this that opens the way for the irrelevancy of that and realizing God's infinitely in love with me in my inability to do it and that's the deep detachment of faith. It's the deep detachment of myself. And in some way, the measure of God's love for me is determined by the measure to which I'd measure up to something. But since the love is measureless, vast and pure in all directions, it doesn't mean we don't need to do our best to overcome hindrances that hurt ourselves, no, it's a moral imperative. But really the great transformation happens in tasting deeply the infinite irrelevance in the love that loves us so in the very deep acceptance of the depths of our poverty like that.

Jim Finley: So this is why he says a bird held by a slender thread is held just as much a prisoner's one held by a great rope if it won't break the thread. And so what he's really trying to help us get at are what are the subtle things in my heart, the habits that I'm monitoring so carefully and I'm discouraged that I haven't gotten over them yet. I haven't gotten over them yet. And that's what he's really trying to get at. How do I send myself over to God infinitely in love with me and the unresolved matters of myself and my fragility, which is the great deliverance really?

Kirsten Oates: Jim, when you talked about the ego, are you suggesting that ego works against us in that journey, in that desire?

Jim Finley: Yeah, my sense of the ego, in the context in which we use it, let's say, basically speaking, the ego's created by God. So God wants us to have a healthy ego because if our ego is unhealthy, we suffer and the people we live with suffer. So our ego is our self-reflective bodily self in time and space, in relationship with others and with the earth. It's me sitting here now in the human experience, you sitting here now, the people listening to this, this is our human experiences, our ego.

Jim Finley: From these traditions, to see that the ego is the consciousness in which we're endowed by God to awaken to God's presence, religious experience, and the ego comes up on within itself or transcends itself, which is religious experience, God the holiness. And also, the ego then, in experiencing that, is to then freely surrender and give itself over to God. That's ego. So in the nobility, the refinement of the ego, is the refinement of that ego sensitivity to the love response, to freely choose to give oneself to this love. The wounded ego, not just that it's wounded by the state of over-identification with the finite, which closes off access to the infinity of the finite, but there are also certain subtle habits in the ego. Often, survival strategy's formed in trauma, and abandonment, and through habits and they're deeply ingrained in us. They're very deeply ingrained.

Jim Finley: So John of the Cross is inviting us to very lovingly be attentive to those things, depending them over to God, knowing that somehow God's loving acceptances for us is very present in our very inability to get past the deeply accepted. And so I think there's something very intimate about the sensuality of this because it touches deep places inside of our body, inside of our emotions to be infused and sustained by this love, this tender heartedness.

Kirsten Oates: It sounds like the starting point is more about being open to be loved by God and to, in a circular motion, keep coming back to that as the grounding point. So to note no matter if my efforts fail me or if I notice myself getting attached to a path or outcomes that keep coming back around to God loves me wherever I'm at.

Jim Finley: Yes, and that's why John of the Cross says in the prologue to the Ascent, he says, "I'm not going to rely here on reason or science because we need to honor it, but it's not capable or coming to what we're talking about." He says, "I want to base everything on scripture," and by scripture, he means primarily for him as Christ. And the very essence of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, is what we're talking about right now. Jesus was always approaching people in the midst of an unresolved thing. Acknowledging it, seeing right through it, into the person God was infinitely in love with and the self that God contemplated in him before the origins are there. Our life is hidden with Christ in God

before the origins of the universe and in His gaze, they could see this birthless, deathless love self. So experiential salvation is placing our trust in that. But easier said than done because we don't easily give up. The ego doesn't easily give up its claim in having the final say in who we are, even though its claim is that we're still not worthy enough yet.

Kirsten Oates: For the love of God?

Jim Finley: For the love of God [crosstalk 00:31:52] because I can bear being finitely loved, I cannot bear being infinitely loved because there's no control in being infinitely loved. So it becomes an act of trust, very deep trust. So John of the Cross is trying to tell us, this is not primarily at the level of concepts or ideas. He's going to look at that in book two on faith, on the transformation of knowledge. He's saying it starts in something as simple as our bodies, and in gratification, and understanding what it is that truly gratifies, ultimately speaking, and how can I be released from myopic, one-dimensional gratifications to God's grace into this infinite gratification? That's the holiness of my breath, my body, my touch, what I touch, and how is everything like that, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Just hearing you say that makes me want to take a pause and put myself back in my own body because it's so easy to get caught up in the thoughts, the ideas. Just for me right now, just to take a breath, and feel my feet, and feel myself in my own body and what's happening in my environment.

Jim Finley: Seriously. Let's say in deep, intimate love with someone, that mutual handing yourselves over to each other, deeply seen and deeply seeing in love or let's say in seeing a child, a small child and you're smitten by it. You're smitten by it. Death, sitting at the deathbed of your dying mother or father or something. There are certain moments that are so physical in this mystical sense, like somehow, our body embodies this love like this. What would it be like to be surrendered over to that? How could I be permeable to this?

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, so present [crosstalk 00:34:04].

Jim Finley: Exactly, so present. Because I think really these experiences of God, I was listening to people describe these moments, they always described them as a heightened sense of presence. There's a heightened sense of presence in which they themselves become more present in this oneness with this presence. In some ways, it's wondrous to them. It's almost like a communion in presence. And so John of the Cross is saying, the sensuality of that, it's not an abstraction, it's your whole, it's your hands, and your face, and your beating heart, your breath. It's the concrete immediacy of yourself incarnating this presence. That is a very mysterious thing really, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, is something that we can do, would it be to notice how we treat ourselves and others, that sense of where we're loving, where we're not loving and start to gently inquire, look into ourselves what's getting in the way of me being loving the way I want to be or being kind to my own body or being as connected and loving as I hope to be?

Jim Finley: Exactly. I do think that. For example, I take married love, for example, then I want to take meditation with her. Two people, they meet, they fall in love and because they fall in love, they got married. And in the marriage, what they discover is that little by little, in all kinds of complicated ways, the tone they use with each other, the way they react to each other,

the way they withhold intimacy from each other, the way they're reactive with each other, without acknowledging it. And little by little by little, it starts to crumble away. So they say, "Look, if we're not careful here, we could lose the whole thing." So how can I calibrate my heart to habituate sensitivity? Because it's by committing ourselves together in that and likewise, when we're alone in a room sitting in meditation, whatever.

Jim Finley: This is why I say we catch ourselves in the act of perpetuating violence and the part of us that needs to be loved the most. Namely, the part of us it doesn't meditate well enough yet. It's enough to make God sit on a stone somewhere and weep. The essence of the violence in the world is in our heart. So here's the very place that needs it the most, is a place that we offer... where we abandon it by giving up on ourselves. I think I'll go watch television, have some brownies. You know what I mean? I can't handle this God stuff. So what we're trying to do is neither invade nor abandon because that's God, that's Christ. So we're keeping an eye over our heart, over our attitudes because attitudes lead to actions and we're trying to habituate these Christ-like attitudes and actions toward ourselves, other people, and really all sentient beings, all animals, the earth, the holiness of everything. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: So Jim, is there orientation, after hearing this talk that we might, after reading John of the Cross, like a slight shift in our orientation that we might begin to have?

Jim Finley: I want to answer as a therapist or as a contemplative spiritual director where you would be your own therapist, your own director. So let's say that you come to me and you're challenged by this, by what you're going through. And also, you're feeling the desire to be faithful to this, but at the same time, there're things going on at home, there's things going on at work, with your health, who knows? And so you're looking for some kind of guidance of how to stabilize and keep your balance in the reality that you're in the midst of.

Jim Finley: So let's say that we engage in a dialogue with each other, which would be the dialogue you'd have with yourself. So a few things that might come out of the dialogue, one would be this, I think sometimes under stress, just when we need the most to pause, have a quiet time, it's harder to pause because we're already late. We hit the floor running. So one option is an interactive freedom. You say, "Before I leave tomorrow, I'm going to take 30 minutes or 15 minutes and the only agenda, I'll light a candle or open the scriptures, whatever it is, but I'm going to exercise my freedom to give myself over to God." And if I'm driving to work, I can be driving to work stressed, but I can say, "You know, my car's a traveling hermitage en via." I'm on the road. And God's infinitely in love with all these people. En via, we're on the way somewhere like this. And when I get into the parking lot and pause for just a minute, help me to be present here to this.

Jim Finley: Also, throughout the day, I can take little mini breaks through the day and I can stand up and walk around the room, or I can go down a hallway and come back, get a cup of tea and taste it. When I sip it, I can practice little mini moments of recalibrating my groundedness to being present and managing things as best I can. Likewise, when I get home. We can do things like that. And then on the other hand, the other side of it, we look at the realities of what you're facing. Are there any options that you have to make things a little bit better or are there any options in your attitude towards those things? There would be more reality-based, more loving.

- Jim Finley: So I would think what we're suggesting here is we would have that kind of sensitivity with ourself. If we could have John of the Cross as our spiritual director, sit down, pour out our heart, what would he say? What would be his tone or stance towards us? We're trying to cultivate that towards ourself. It happened like that and then share it with other people. I think it's also good if there's just even one person in your life in some way does see you this way and increase your gratitude to God for that person in your life.
- Kirsten Oates: One last question, you mentioned in the talk, and you've said it a few times, that St. John of the Cross is beautiful but hard to understand. I can't remember your exact words, but challenging and confusing, I think it was one of the words you used. And I was going to ask you, how long in your life were you confused by John of the Cross? When did it suddenly become clear?
- Jim Finley: Well, I think it was different for me in this sense. At home, there was all this trauma and I started having these experiences as a child. Like God sustaining me in the trauma and in the ninth grade had started reading Thomas Merton. I didn't yet even know about John of the Cross or any of these mystics yet. And so I was living in this cloister monastery, in complete silence, and chanting the songs, and so on, and it was in that silence that I began to have these experiences of God's presence in this silence. So when I would talk with Thomas Merton about these experiences, he started to guide me in reading the mystics.
- Jim Finley: I remember the first time I walked out into the woods with John of the Cross, and sat down, and opened it, at one level, it was hard to understand, I could just tell a lot of it went right over me. But because of the silence and because of where I already was, I really experienced it. It was like listening to music or it was like going right to my heart or into my stomach. It's like a deeper way to understand what it means to understand that something deep within you recognizes what he's talking about and it matters. It mattered.
- Jim Finley: So I was fortunate that way, I think, that I entered into relationship with John of the Cross, his deathless presence in that way because we are who we are. We approach it as we approach it. And so I think for all of us, regardless of where we are, if we calibrate our heart to fine enough scale, there is, in our stillest moments, with a child or with a beloved or sitting alone, there are certain moments where we have intimations with unexplainable nearness. And we know that John of the Cross is talking about that and we go very, very slow and just let it soak in and walk with it. Little by little, it becomes clearer, not conceptually clearer, but it becomes intuitively, viscerally clear. It's like a language that bears witness unexplainable things and you get acclimated to it over time. That's what I think.
- Kirsten Oates: That description was really helpful that you gave, Jim, about when you first read the book, it's like the visceral sensation of awe, which is where we started this conversation is, those moments, but you gave a nice description of how that felt in your body and that's the sensation of it.
- Jim Finley: Yeah. That's why I encouraged, as we go through these mystics together, it's good that you find that a certain mystic, for some reason, speaks to you more directly than another. It's like finding a contemplative spiritual director that you find one that aligns with himself or herself with you. But I do think they all have this quality about them. I'll end on this note. I was thinking of Jesus recently this way. In the monastery, I learned to read the gospels like

this, like Jesus as the mystic teacher. And the way I put it is it became clear to me as I read the gospels like this, is that everything that Jesus says is like falling off a cliff and that it's a bottomless abyss that will never, never, never, never get to the bottom of anything He says because it's the bottomless abyss of God's presence, welling up, voicing itself in the world.

Jim Finley: And likewise, everything Jesus says is like a wall of sugar granite, impassible when we approach it from the opinions of our ego. And so to be with Jesus, to read everything that Jesus says and does, and this what John of the Cross says, John of the Cross saw Christ, he saw this as a rendezvous with the mystic Christ. This way is this true meaning of the essence of incarnate infinity in the world and the human heart. It's like that, I think. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, beautiful. So one encouragement that we might give to people is when they listen to your Lectio sessions, when they go into the meditation, is to really just take a moment to ground themselves in their own body, in their own breath, and to just be present to themselves.

Jim Finley: I would say this, let's say first, they listened to the whole thing first, like half hour. It's a talk, just let it wash over them. Then go back, and replay it, and just take one thing they've got to you. Just one phrase that got with you. Turn it off and sit with that and ask God for the grace to experientially enter into the beauty of that. That's what's always worked for me, like aphorisms. The one-liners that get to you. Like poetry and blank verse, you just take that one thing. And then if you want to, what helps me is write that out, and fold it up, and keep it in your pocket over your heart, and as you go through the day, touch it. And little by little, this language gets inside of you. You know what I mean? The cadences of the teacher's voice start echoing in your own voice and they draw you into this thing. That's what's worked for me. That helps.

Kirsten Oates: That's beautiful. I've got one of your one-liners on my desk. I'm just going to show it to you, I read this every day, which says, a love shines bright that conquers a traumatized world.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: I love that one.

Jim Finley: That's lovely and it's true. It's true.

Kirsten Oates: Someone very clever said that too. Okay. Well, thank you for your time today.

Jim Finley: Yeah, good. Thank you. It's great.

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