

Turning to the Mystics



St. John of the Cross
Listener Questions
with James Finley

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to The Mystics.

Kirsten Oates: Welcome everyone to this special session. This is the end of our series, Turning to The Mystics on St. John of The Cross, and so in the session today, Jim will be addressing some of the questions that came in. But before we begin Jim, you just wanted to make a bit of an opening statement about the questions and where we're headed.

Jim Finley: Yes. First of all, there were a lot of questions-

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: ... And I read them all, went through all of them. Several thought is that, one, they're really great questions, because they're the kind of questions that contemplative seekers ask because it's endlessly evocative, what about this? What about that? And that's normal. That's a good sign right there. And because there were so many we could actually... Which we won't, actually go through each of the questions, taking five to 10 minutes on each one, giving the time they deserve, and it might take us a year to do that or two years, and that would be a good podcast by the way-

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: ... Because it would be all real, but I don't think we should change format like this. I think we should stay going, because the accumulative effect of just listening to these mystics, it soaks into you. Little by little, it gets clearer and clearer as time goes by like that.

Jim Finley: Also, thought two about these questions. It just shows you that we're right at the edge of spiritual direction. If we take one step further, I think what matters is how this is unfolding in you. How is this unfolding in me? And we just stay with that and move with that. I was very encouraged by the number of questions and the quality and sincerity of the questions, so this dialogical part of our time together, I think is key to what we're doing.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. I agree Jim, and I read all the questions also, and just really thank everyone for making the effort to communicate with us that way. Also, Jim, I have heard you say too, that reading the questions the way you do, you've taken many days with them will influence what you teach with the next mystic, and certain things you might emphasize and notice, so the questions will help with that part of the podcast as well.

Jim Finley: Exactly. When I give these silent contemplative retreats, which I don't do anymore, and after each conference and the sittings, there's questions. When it ends, that last session, not only are they more in the flow of it together, but I'm more in the flow of where they are, in the way I respond to them. I think that's exactly right about these questions. Yeah-

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: ... Kind of moving along together here.

Kirsten Oates: Not one wasted, just all really appreciated and-

Jim Finley: Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: ... Yes, so thank you. Well, let's start with one of the questions. I'm going to read this question from Josh, who says, there is somewhere in the eternal distance, something that tells me that silence is precisely what I'm supposed to be finding, and there is I suppose some comfort in that, but in the meantime, I have to make decisions about everyday life and how best to live out a calling to share my own experience and teach and balance that with making a living and having a family.

Kirsten Oates: Should I sell my house and pick up with my wife and kids and go back to school to put more of my time and efforts into studying and writing? Should I write more music, make more recordings and play more shows and connect with people that way? Should I put more focus on the kind of teaching that I'm currently doing, and try to make more of that? Should I simplify my life so that I can put more quality time into being with my family?

Kirsten Oates: There are not enough hours in the day, and every endeavor that I consider seems possible and worthwhile, but I can't do them all, and I long for guidance, and I don't know how to be led by silence, even though I think that may be the answer. I'm just not certain how to let it be the answer.

Jim Finley: Very good. Let's say first that when we're interiorly called to a more contemplative way of life, that path, that following the contemplative path is incarnate in our vocational calling. For example, in the monastery, the monastic life is carefully designed to remove all the distracting complexities where there's just nothing but the silence and the Psalms and the [inaudible 00:05:24], and that's their vocation.

Jim Finley: In that silence, it has its own challenges. It's not always that. But what we're doing is, how do we hear when we feel this contemplative call and we live in the midst of the world? What does it mean to be a contemplative lay-person in the midst of the world? That's what we're about here, I think.

Jim Finley: My thought is this, one way to look at it would be, let's say Josh is married, and so we might say your primary vocation is your marriage, and that you're being called to love and be loved by your wife and she by you, and to walk that walk together with its challenges and setbacks and growth and sense of the holiness of that and so on, and it matters.

Jim Finley: And also then with your children. Parenting has its own abundance of problems and graces. The real world sifts us like wheat. We walk our walk and how can I learn to be a clear minded, authentic, vulnerable, loving, patient, evermore honest person in the world?

Jim Finley: The next level, then if we're endowed with the gift of faith, how can we let our faith illumine this path through either prayer and our union with God? If so that our union with God can illumine our union with the people that we live with? What's God asking of me here? It's a question of discernment. How do you sort it out? You pray over it and you talk it over with your spouse, you journal it out. All things considered, what seems to be the best thing right now? And I find my way, there's that.

Jim Finley: What talking about here too, in the light of that, assuming all the above and we are, is this thing you mentioned at the beginning about silence.

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

Jim Finley: The person just gets the feeling that has caused to listen to silence, be present in silence, with just how to do that, and see that's the contemplative part. I have a few thoughts then, and this assumes and permeates everything I've already said. This permeates everything, is that silence is not... It starts first of all, by fidelity to a daily rendezvous with God in which you sit in silence. In this silence, you're listening to God, the likes of which you can hear God speaking to you.

Jim Finley: Also, in this silence, you're very sensitive to moments that you were silenced by the beloved's embrace, your child's laughter, the darkness of the night. There are certain moments where the silence is not just refraining from speech, away from thought, but you were silenced by the unexpected beauty, with the unexpected closeness, so you listen very closely to those moments.

Jim Finley: Next in your daily rendezvous with God in your prayer and reflection and silence, what you're doing really is cultivating the habit of that interior silence of being silenced like this. As you listen to the silence, the silence deepens little by little, and so the readings of these mystics, they're guiding us in that because if you've noticed all these talks on the mystics, we can't follow them unless we listen, but we have to listen in a very intimate way. We can't listen by trying to figure out what they're saying. It's not a figure outer, it isn't. But what we can do is sense in the cadence and rhythms of their voice that which silences our heart, and puts us to rest to listen ever more deeply.

Jim Finley: Then we ask God then to bring that silent attentiveness, to hear God's voice and not to break the thread as we carry it out to be at our marriage, with our children or with our work, our creative endeavors, and so it's a lifetime learning curve of habituating this, but I think the uniquely contemplative part is the silence-

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

Jim Finley: ... Which is this deep inner silence of being silenced. Then in the silence we listen, and then there's intimations of God's voice that to come to us in the silence, and the mystics voice echoes with those cadences that's why they're so... That's why they mean so much to us. They help us to get attuned to that. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, I had two things for Josh to notice. One was just him committing to a daily practice of silence. If he feels drawn to silence, to committing to a daily practice of silence of meditation.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Then the second thing is to notice throughout the day where he might experience what you called his heart being silenced and those moments of silence. That's obviously a metaphor, but what does that mean, my heart is silenced?

Jim Finley: I'll give an example, and then how we can do it as a choice. He's a father, he has children. I don't know how old their children are, but let's say he's reading one of the children a good night story, and in reading the good night story, the children says, "Daddy, it says something." And his heart melts. It's just his heart melts. We're having a talk with his wife over dinner and they linger over dinner and the conversation goes to a very deep place he didn't expect it to go. There are certain moments where you pick up the subtlety, like the refining of attentiveness that happens like that.

Jim Finley: Then the next thing is we can then choose to take the backwards step and a middle pause before we respond. For example, I'll say how it happens often in therapy. I would say working with trauma, someone is going through something, they're going through a lot, some big crisis kind of thing. I realized as I listen, this person is in a very deep place, it's complicated, and if I go barging in with a lot of ready-made answers, I'll get in the way. If I say, "I got a lot of thoughts for you, take notes, I got the answer." I miss the point.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: If instead of, before I say anything, I pause, and in the pause I step back to listen at a more interior level that somehow comes closer to the interior level of the pain that they're sharing. Then once I'm attuned to the pain that they're sharing, then when I speak and say something, I say something that's empathic with that, and because I meet them at that level, that helps them to listen to themselves.

Jim Finley: It isn't as if there aren't practical decisions to be made, but the decisions themselves are grounded in that depth dimension. Then when you feel you're getting off track, like you're talking too much, you're going off with all your answers, whatever, you pause again, so you're endlessly circling back to slow down over and over to be more and more present, and eventually that becomes a habit of learning to be with yourself, learning to be with the other person, and that's the contemplative way to be in the world, I think. Then what you're really doing is that's an echo of how you learn to be with God.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: With God it's the same way. Then you can sense God's presence speaking to you through this person, through this event, and that's my sense of-

Kirsten Oates: Oh, that's beautiful. And it's an echo of how God is with us, is that-

Jim Finley: This is unexplainably. Then anyone who submitted to a creative process, whenever they realize what they're doing, it's the outflow of what was given to them, and that attentiveness, which makes the creativity deep. It gives it substance because it doesn't come out of the ego, it comes through the person and whatever it is that they're engaged in. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: That's beautiful. I love the way you connected practice and life in that answer, that's so helpful, Jim. I have another question. This one is from Ed, and Ed says, "I'm a first mansion person who does not pray well or pray often. As a result, I'm just starting

along a path of trying to see God in all things. This is very hard as I find that I'm distracted, and in my head constantly, my habits of the mind and heart get in the way. As I learn about John of the Cross' teachings, I'm feeling that his teaching is too advanced for me, as I'm at such an early stage of my spiritual life. Please help me understand how to approach his teachings as a true spiritual beginner."

Jim Finley: Yes. I want to give an example. By the way, he's not alone. It's as if he's the only one out of all these people who feels this way. Thomas Merton once said, "Let's face it. We're beginners all of our lives."

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: I want to give an example. Let's say you don't know any French, and you decide for personal enrichment, you're going to sign up and take a class to beginner's class to learn French. You'd like to learn French or read French, whatever. And inadvertently, without realizing it, when you get into the class, you realize that all the students are fifth year doctoral level French students, and they all... They're all talking in French. You can tell you're out of your league. You better quietly slip out the door and go get reassigned, "I'm in the wrong class." And that's how you can feel and things like this, with these mystics, their mystics for God's sakes, really.

Jim Finley: One option, you may feel just this isn't for you right now. That's possible maybe later. I would suggest something else too, by the very fact that we were drawn to that, and all those along with you feel this way too. That something in you drew you to start to listen to this, so I have some thoughts. One is, listen to the mystics that start out by talking to beginners. So Teresa of Avila, the first three mansions, think of the interior castle, talking to the beginner.

Jim Finley: The next mystic we're going to look at together is Guigo's work The Ladder of Monks, and he starts out with Lectio Devina, discursive meditation, and prayer as a ladder to heaven, and he gives very practical guidelines, a very basic Lectio, very basic... Because if we don't do our homework on the basic levels and try to go right to the mystical, we keep falling off the ladder.

Jim Finley: We have to do our homework, and that's holiness. Really, we just want to do God's will. So we're always circling back around so we can join God where God's joining us where we are right now, and it'll grow by itself. That's the next [inaudible 00:17:28]. By the way, Thomas Merton is very good this way too, because he's too beginners. A lot of his language is so direct.

Jim Finley: By the way, the pastoral writings of Richard Rohr, the teachings, the living score are very pastoral this way, it's coming out of a very contemplative, pastoral connection to things, so you find the people that resonate [inaudible 00:17:48], and you go from there.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: The next thought is, let's say you're reading Thomas Merton or you're reading Teresa, or you're listening to one of the podcasts, whatever. Let's say that a single phrase strikes you, it just strikes you. If you're listening to the podcast for a minute, you'd put it on pause, you don't just rush right over, like the gate of heaven flies open and you go walking right past it.

And you sit with, what is it in that saying of Teresa or whatever? What is it that got to you? And really, was it an echo of God's voice in your heart on the intimacy of the beautiful?

Jim Finley: In the moment, you were quickened, you were a momentary mystic, and the moment you freely choose to pause and rest in what fleetingly awakened you, you're living the contemplative life. The thing about this, and I know it sounds very up in the air and so on, but when you really look at what they're saying, it's the opposite. It's disarmingly simple. We're trying to figure it out or get it, but there's nothing to get.

Jim Finley: See, we're trying to be disarmed by searching for explanations, to be vulnerable to the intimacy of what can never be explained, but what we tasted in our heart, and then we learn to listen to it. If you learn to be very patient that way and start connecting the dots, so you start to find an inner constancy, like a habituated sensitivity to that level. To me, I found that very helpful, and always circling back to be aware, because that's where God is waiting for us.

Jim Finley: God is not patiently waiting for us to become mystics. God is patiently waiting for us to taste the mystical depth of simple things and to be true to ourselves and very patient and grateful. Then it grows by itself in constancy to that. Anyway, that's the approach, I would suggest.

Kirsten Oates: That's so helpful, Jim, and beautiful. I got the sense too though, even reading Ed's question, the way he used quotes from the mystics in his question, that he's well on his way to being touched by the mystics.

Jim Finley: We could tell him, "Look what you're doing, you're quoting mystics already."

Kirsten Oates: That's what I thought.

Jim Finley: Holy cow. Something is happening, just keep it up.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. I certainly thought that, oh, he could be a mystic comedian in the making.

Jim Finley: He could.

Kirsten Oates: I don't pray well and I don't pray often.

Jim Finley: Exactly. Or, we could say, if he would go to one of these mystics for spiritual direction and he had an hour with St. Teresa of Avila, or whatever, and he would just tell her, "I don't understand this. I can't get it." The mystic would say back, "Exactly, of course you don't, because if you understood it, it wouldn't be what you're looking for. It would be just one more thing that you understand." See, you're trying to be gently humbled.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: Merton says one of the great things about monastic life is freedom from the need to understand, which is to comprehend, which is really a deeper way to understand what it means to understand, which is to be awakened or grateful or amazed like that.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Another question. This one is from David. Presumably, John of The Cross wrapped his prayer in the daily community prayer of the church, and the Eucharist as a Carmelite

priest. But what of now? Is the same wraparound or context there? And if so, is there a need to make its connection stronger? Or what place does the Eucharist play in the life of the contemplative?

Jim Finley: Notice that all these mystics that we're studying are all celibates. They're all priests, they're monastics, they're cloistered nuns, they're hermits, and so for John of The Cross, he was a priest, and so to celebrate the Eucharist, to hear confessions, to give homilies, to spiritual direction. Same with Thomas Merton. He was a vowed religious, he was a priest. It was the same with Eckhart, Dominican priests, theologian nature.

Jim Finley: For them, their vocation is grounded in the language of that, but the mystic, these mystic priests and nuns and so on, they bear witness, they don't get caught up in the theological formulations and rituals, but see the formulations as poetry or see the formulations as parables, or see the revelation of the mystery of crisis incarnate infinity, which is life itself, so within the tradition, the heart of the tradition, they go beyond the teachings of the tradition.

Jim Finley: Belief like the creed. The creed is a sign of faith, but we're not saved by belief, we're saved by faith. And faith is an obscure habit in the heart as in a mirror darkly, we know that God is unexplainably with us in all things, which is how Christ lived his life, so there's that.

Jim Finley: Now for us as laymen, say I'm a Catholic tradition person, Catholic, whatever tradition you're in. I think it's personal. Certainly I know for me, when I was raised by my mother who was a devout Catholic, I was very Catholic that way. The monastery was very Catholic, and in some ways I still am very Catholic. I have the Eucharist here in my home, and I have icons all over the place, and when Maureen was living, she was very Catholic.

Jim Finley: But in another way, for me, I haven't been to mass in over five years, and I haven't been to Sunday mass, I think in over 10 years, don't care, too crowded for me, I don't care for it. But when I would be giving silent contemplative retreats, I always saw to it that there was a contemplative liturgy on the retreat. I also had it where they were invited to stay up and get up during the middle of the night on Saturday night, and I would exposition the blessed sacrament, and the deep sense of this mystical dimension of Eucharist.

Jim Finley: When I was seeing people in therapy over at St. Monica's Church, often between clients, I would walk over and sit alone in the church, so I'm very Catholic in the ethos, or the beauty of it, but it doesn't pertain to me anymore, like participating in that way, I don't feel that need for that. To your own self, be true. A discernment question. To what extent and in what ways in which is your active involvement in the local parish and the sacraments and whatever? And what's the contemplative depth dimension of that involvement like that? That's my sense of it.

Jim Finley: By the way, when I was at the monastery, one of the novices raised his hand and asked Thomas Merton, and Merton was giving this talk on the presence of God. He says, "You get the impression that the church teaches that God is everywhere, but God... so God is present everywhere, but God is really present in the church." In order to get closer, you have to go in the church to be where God's really present. Then God is really present in the Eucharist and then God's really present in heaven.

Jim Finley: When you get up to the ordinary life, it's like one part per billion or something. If you're

lucky, you can pick up a little divinity here and there, but it's a very diluted affair, but God is really the reality of everywhere. But sometimes you need a holy place to help you recognize the holiness of every place. You need a holy time to recognize the holiness of all time. You need to holy meal to realize the holiness of meals, and I think that's the transformative power of that for me. Anyway, that's the approach that helps me.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. That's really beautiful. Yeah. You teach Jim, about how it's so easy to skim over the depth of our own life and the busy-ness of the day to day, so what are reminders for people? And if it's not church and the Eucharist, is there something else that they can have as a sacred space in their home? Or a-

Jim Finley: Exactly. Remember years ago, Cheech and Chong? Like old burn out hippie here, and they had one of their songs that they used to sing at Catholic, "Two, four, six, eight, time to trans-substantiate. Everybody on your knees, fiddle with your rosaries." By the way, some people are going over the surface of their life because they're sitting there at mass as an empty gesture and answers and they walk out and go home and then argue with each other, so it depends on what you make of it.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: This Richard Rohr, the new orthodoxy is Jesus, the orthodoxy of love, and then the sacraments radiate that insofar as they call us to surrender to that radiation and not give into it as a set of answers. It's a personal thing.

Kirsten Oates: That's good. You can be busy skimming over the depth of your own life in church is what [inaudible 00:28:14].

Jim Finley: You can. Thomas Merton once said, there's a lot of Catholics losing their faith and they're losing it in church.

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

Jim Finley: Because the church isn't bearing witness to its own mystical heritage, and so you can really be fleeing from God through heavy church. The reason some people are at church every night, they can't bear to go home, whereas church is meant to help us go home with a Christlike heart-

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: ... And bring it home every day. Yeah, that's [inaudible 00:28:41].

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. I really appreciate the way you teach about the measure of our faith being love. When people met St. John of The Cross, would they say he did... He was great with the Eucharist? Or would they say he was a very loving man and that's what made him a mystic?

Jim Finley: He was both. You know what I mean? By the way, there's another thing about the podcast too, is I was giving a conference in Cleveland, this big Episcopal church, and this long-time friend of mine who's a priest, he raised his hand and he said, "Do you think about mystical union with God and so on with these retreatants?" He said, "Do you think you're preaching

to the choir? That is everybody here?”

Jim Finley: I said, “I hope so.” Because Catholics will come to me after these retreats, and they’ll say, “How come I don’t hear this in church? How come I don’t hear anybody talk about this simple wordless communion?” Who talks to those? I think that’s what the podcast is about, I think it’s a hunger for this depth and simplicity of presence, which is really at the heart of our faith, but it’s going to need keep bearing witness to and gather [inaudible 00:29:58].

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: Turning to *The Mystics*, will continue in a moment.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, here’s a question from Sharon and she said, I was listening to the first session of St. John of The Cross, where you gave a list of how you can tell you are becoming a mystic, a list of attributes. She’s saying, what if many of those attributes are true, but you really don’t want to be a mystic? And there’s some upper case letters there. Can God make you one without your agreement? Or maybe it’s an inner agreement. Then she says, asking for a friend.

Jim Finley: LOL.

Kirsten Oates: LOL.

Jim Finley: That’s great. Well, Sharon, you can tell your friend, wink, wink. No, let’s talk about this. That’s a real question.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: That’s a real question. I think being sensitively responsive to mystical things is a gift. You pick up in the innuendos and the intimations, something that you interiorly recognize, you’re drawn to it, it’s a grace predisposition like that. Then the next step would be that you realize within yourself a longing to abide is a calling. With these mystics, are they writing for people who are being so called?

Jim Finley: Then you realize that to follow this path is going to ask of me, the letting go or the giving up of the present state that I’m in, which although I’m accustomed to it, I find lacking in the depth that I recognize, that I’m not yet ready to let go of those compromising things like this, and that’s a very great place to be at. This is second mansion for Teresa.

Jim Finley: Then the question becomes, what will become of me if I surrender to this calling? But what will become of me if I don’t see? That the price paid for the half lived life is bitter, and if something calls on us, but since love is always offered and never imposed, it’s a calling. God understands infinitely more than you do why you’re not ready yet.

Jim Finley: The thing is to be sincere with God and tell God, you’re not, “I’m just not there yet.” Of course, God is saying to you, “I understand that infinitely more than you do, but notice I already touched you even before you knew it existed.” When you pray or when you’re with me in prayer, why don’t you and I talk over why it’s scary to come closer to me? In this wordless way like this. And what is it about it that you find scary?

Jim Finley: Because at one level it is scary to the self that's still identified with what compromises the heart, it is scary. It's like the alcoholic who's afraid to go to AA meetings because if he does, he might have to give up drinking, even though the drinking is killing him, but it's only until he goes, having admitted... We have come to admit that we're powerless over it.

Jim Finley: "Why not be in this very gentle place? I'm not going to make any moves on you. I have your best interests at heart. I'm infinitely trustworthy." I think what you might find in that unhurried willingness to be like that, you'll find that these mystical depths will come welling up out of the sensitivities of that willingness. Then you might find the whole path is like that, really, I think.

Jim Finley: I would suggest that tone to it, and just... And by the way, sometimes a person feels that understandably, who knows what else they're dealing with in their lives? Life is hard sometimes, you're just not up to it.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: Sometimes what they discover is the infinite patience of God, and a week later, or five years later, it's there again, but you're at a different place, and what you couldn't respond to before is now given to you to respond to it, so almost like it's trusting in an open-ended, free-wheeling way, everything is right on schedule, and you're very ambivalence is a grace. The thing is to listen to the ambivalence and respect it.

Jim Finley: There's a part of you that longs for it, but there's a part of you that is afraid of what you long for, and you need to be respectful to the part that's afraid and talk to it and understand what it's afraid of, and be there for it, because God is here for it. I think it's this spiritual direction question, I think these kinds of sensitivities are helpful.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, that's helpful. Jim, I realize we've talked about spiritual direction quite a lot, and not everyone even knows what a spiritual director is, so it might be worth just talking a little bit about when you say spiritual direction, that it could be with your pastor in a church, pastoral spiritual direction, but there are people who have a vocation and are certified as spiritual directors.

Jim Finley: Yes. One of the questions has to do with, how do you find... How do you know you're with a dark night director?

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And we can go to that now, if you want.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. I can read the question.

Jim Finley: Why don't we read it? Because it kind of segues into that, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. That's a great idea. That question is from Lynn, and she said, how could I identify a dark night experience teacher for guidance today? What would you say are their characteristics?

Jim Finley: Yeah. Sometimes I'll say to people in all my talks, people talk to me about these things is there are people who realize how great it would be to find a contemplative director, and they're still looking. There are people looking for a contemplative director, they have a director, a pastoral counselor like, "How is God present in this situation? How is God-." But when it comes to this, they don't know what you're talking about.

Jim Finley: I also talk to people who are looking for a contemplative director, found their contemplative director and he ran off with the cook and went to Idaho or some damn place, like it was so great [inaudible 00:37:49]. Thomas Merton once told me, he said, "Once in a while, you'll find somebody with whom you can talk about such things, but it's a temporary arrangement, and you'll spend most of your life without such a person."

Jim Finley: How do you know you have found a contemplative director? Where do you even look for such? You don't look them up in the yellow pages. The Way of a Pilgrim, it's funny, he has this question and he says he went from village to village, knocking on doors, asking if they have any contemplative directors of the neighborhood. It's so funny. It's like the longest search.

Jim Finley: One approach, I know people are all over the place are listening to this, but one place to look is if you're near a retreat house, and if the retreat house you look on their schedule, they offer contemplative retreats, and you call and ask, "Do you have any spiritual directors there who do contemplative spiritual direction?" They're not always easy to find.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: How do you know you found such a person? I think here's how you tell, that when you're sitting with the person and you struggle to find words to express such things, they understand you, that's how you know. They listen, and you can tell there's a resonance in them that they're comfortable with what you're saying. They offer guidance in that, and it might have to work out in other ways, personality wise and different things, but I think that's how you would tell.

Jim Finley: Another spiritual direction is two people sitting together, sharing such things that neither one can explain, but they recognize in the exchange back and forth. Notice by the way, the writings of the mystics are contemplative spiritual direction, because when you realize your own heart knows what they're talking about, even though a lot of it is still hidden in the timeless world of grace, the deathless presence of the spiritual master, John of the Cross, Teresa, they're right there. You're the directee, and their deathless presence lives in the depth of their words, and you follow it, you cherish it, and you walk with it. I think really that's how you find it, the person understands.

Kirsten Oates: Do you think Jim, just going back to where we started today around the silence, do you think spiritual direction... The contemplative spiritual direction is really trying to have a conversation out of that silence? It's trying to attune to that depth dimension in a conversation about life, about what's happening in your life?

Jim Finley: I do very much so. That's why I think this also has to do with deep healing work in therapy too, but in contemplative spiritual direction, the two people are talking, and the exchange, there's a moment like silence between them. There's also this shared recognition that if they

would say something, they would prematurely intrude upon that silence, so it would be words that would break the silence.

Jim Finley: They can also tell that when they wait, the words come to them in silence, they don't break the silence, but manifest it. It's the same way with the mystics, it's coming out of a deep silence, like an eternal silence.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: When you read them out loud very slowly, they're not words that intrude upon the silence, the [inaudible 00:41:45], they're words that manifest, which is God's word, silence of God speaking all things into being, and we move in the rhythms of that creative voice and we move back and forth with each other.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: I think that's also true in any intimate conversation with people who are very intimate with each other. There are certain moments between them where everything they say comes out of a shared listening, and they're sharing the listening back. You know what I mean? It's like-

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: Yeah, I think you are.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. And just going back to what you said at the very beginning, I'm just thinking about when you read these questions, you could feel that they come out of that deeper place-

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: ... And I'm sure you paused and sat with it before you thought about how to answer.

Jim Finley: Yeah, very much so. I was comparing to what it feels like on retreats, when there's questions at the end, people raise their hand. It's so moving because of the depth of sincerity the question expresses. I realized if I read the first question, there are 30 pages of single-spaced questions, then if I would just... I got that one next-

Kirsten Oates: Right.

Jim Finley: ... I'd be portraying what this is about, and so how do I slow it way down to be present to a question so that I can join the person in the depth from which their question arises? And respond in such a way that that person, and along with everyone listening with us, because this is contemplative church, it's a community, we're all together, but we're together, not because something is being explained, but we're together because we can tell the words are flowing from a space in which we've gathered together to be transformed in those, just God's word in us really? Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. Well, I think this is a great time. We had one voicemail come in, so Corey, is going to play it for us.

John: Hi, Jim. My name is John, I'm just west of Philly, and I would love to hear you riff on just

this. You've made mention a number of times that Thomas Merton says that there's a sort of loneliness to being a mystic, and I've enjoyed these figures Merton and Teresa, and now St. John of The Cross for so long, but I found so few people that know how to talk about them.

John: Sometimes, it feels as though there's that sense of loneliness because I've gone through my own dark night of the soul, and I read *Dark Night of The Soul* as it was happening, but it's so rare to find someone else who's gone through a dark night of the soul for themselves and let alone even knows how to talk about it.

John: If it's possible, I'd love to just hear you riff, although you do more than just riff, you drop pearls for us. If you can maybe speak to the loneliness that can happen from being on the other side of the dark night of the soul, from having passed through it, and how that absolutely changes everything, and so what do we do with this mystic loneliness? Again, my name is John. Thank you so much for your time. I very much look forward to hearing your response. Cheers.

Jim Finley: Yeah, by the way, in Thomas Merton's book, *Disputed Questions*, it's a series of contemplative essays. He has an essay on a philosophy of solitude, and Maureen used to read that over and over again. It's a lovely piece on mystical loneliness and the intimacy of loneliness and so on. Let's reflect on loneliness for a minute.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: The phenomena of loneliness. Let's say one level of loneliness is being all alone, no one is around who we don't want to be, so that's a human experience. We're lonely. There's a deeper kind of loneliness, in which we're lonely with people who we can tell can't see who we are, and you can't make yourself seen. That's a deeper loneliness, I think.

Jim Finley: I think there's a deeper kind of loneliness in which you're lonely for yourself. That somehow you sense within yourself a depth of presence, and you're caught in the centrifuge of things that spin you out toward the edge of things, and you're trying to abide at the... You're kind of, "Why do I live in such exile?" I'm lonely for myself, and I choose so. Which is the opposite of the ego's preoccupation with itself, which is what the deep self keeps the deep self so lonely, because of like that. There's that.

Jim Finley: Then there's a loneliness for God, and the loneliness for God is an echo of God's infinite loneliness for you. The gift of loneliness then, mystical loneliness. We're talking about modalities of that. This is another way I think helps me to look at it is, any time anybody radically surrenders to a calling, for example, not just someone who occasionally reads poetry or appreciates poetry, or very so often writes poetry, but they're called to surrender their whole life over to the beauty of the poetic, like Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*.

Jim Finley: For such a person on such a path, they're lonely, because the people around them no longer understand what it is that's happened to this person, and you don't blame them for it, because you don't understand it either, and so that loneliness is... The thing is Merton says is, the thing about loneliness at this level, it's a loneliness enters into the loneliness of all of humanity. He said, "You'll never find the intimacy you're looking for by walking around that loneliness, but only by going right through the center of it."

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Wow!

Jim Finley: When you do, you discover where our lives converge in lonely, because one way of understanding loneliness or solitude is you're less and less able to explain to anybody, including yourself, what's happening to you. I'm lonely, and I'm on a pilgrimage, because that's what keeps calling me to itself deeper and deeper. The same way as someone who becomes an artist, not just occasionally, but they give themselves over to the beautiful, it flows through them, their [inaudible 00:49:04] are disciplined, so that can happen.

Jim Finley: Or anyone committed to deep healing, or anyone connected to the suffering of others. Anyone connected to solitude, so anyone who really sets out to be faithful to the depth of simple intimacy of this calling, they're alone and that they're less and less able to explain, but if they really look at it, at one level, although they're left alone, there's a loneliness to this.

Jim Finley: Sometimes I used to realize when I'd go on tour giving retreats, a talk like this. Part of it, when I was with a room full of people who are like this too, I wasn't so lonely anymore. You've got a room full of lonely people who realize how one they are with God, it's very strange [inaudible 00:49:52].

Jim Finley: I think another way to look at this kind of loneliness is that the more we are transformed in this way, the discernment that is authentic, is that it radicalizes our communion with others. It's like a Catholic writer, I can't... Romano Guardini, he has this way of saying, he puts it, he says, "It's a realization that although I am not God, I'm not other than God either. Although I'm not any of you, I am not other than any of you either. And although I am not the earth, I'm not other than the earth either." He said, "I believe this is the essence of this realization."

Jim Finley: It's a loneliness that is paradoxically the all encompassing communion of you and God, the living and the dead, of birth and death, and things, and I think it's that. It's the loneliness of Jesus. His own disciples didn't understand him. He spent whole nights alone in prayers. He was executed, and he who sees the father sees me.

Jim Finley: I think it's a deep question really, that we're not addictively numb or flee from the loneliness at one level, we be patient with ourselves and don't overdo it. We need to pace this, because the loneliness is the counterpoint of the intimacy, they interpenetrate each other.

Jim Finley: Perspectives like these help me. Then I think the gift of the podcast, is a language, we're not alone in being somebody like this. Also, when I used to travel, I used to go back and forth across the United States and Canada, and a half a dozen times or so in Europe. What was so interesting was that wherever I went, we would do these things, I would ring the bell. Wherever we went, we would stand straight and bow and we'd ring the bell.

Jim Finley: Whenever I would sit in silence in a room of people like that, it's the same all over the world. That's why if you're in your own living room, you sit, you can never sit alone, because you're sitting with people all over the world who are sitting, and we're all woven into each other. To me, that's some perspectives on solitude that help me.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. That's really helpful, Jim. Thank you. Yeah. I have two technical questions, and I might start with the... There's one about the dark night. Jim, tell me if it's okay to answer this one

today, but there was a question that came in. What is the difference between the two dark nights, night of senses and night of the spirit? Can you describe the night of the spirit?

Jim Finley: No, we can do that. But I want to be sure we get that one of Bob.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: Mysticism with the Evelyn Underhill [inaudible 00:52:53].

Kirsten Oates: Yes, that will be last one.

Jim Finley: Let's go back again to John of The Cross. What's the difference between the night of the senses and the night of the spirit? Again, for John of The Cross, and each mystic has his or her own words for this. The dark night is the grace process in which God weans us off our ability to experience God in finite ways. We're accustomed to experiencing God in our prayer, in our reflection, in our Lectio, in our... And we go for a rendezvous with God, and God doesn't show up at the thing, because God is weaning us off our dependency on finite ways of experiencing the infinite presence of God, which is just to clear the way for the infinite way of experiencing the infinite presence of God that obscurely foreshadows when we pass through the veil of death and to eternal glory.

Jim Finley: The night of the senses starts with gratification. See gratification to the five senses, the appetites of the five senses fueled with the desire for gratification through our eyes, through touch, through sound to be gratified. What you realize is, that which gratifies the senses are finite. The beauty of the mountains, whatever it is, it's a finite. The senses that perceive the finite beauty is finite.

Jim Finley: The you that's gratified by the finite beauty of the finite thing is finite. The whole thing it's all graced. God creates it. God is completely present in it, and God creates it. There's a holiness to it, but it's finite. What happens in the dark night of the senses, is that deprivation of gratification. If we don't panic and we don't run away, there begins to well up out of that powerless is that lack of gratification, a very subtle sweet gratification. They're so mysterious because it's infinite.

Jim Finley: It isn't like either, or, like all of a sudden it switches over. You go back and forth, so little by little, you get more and more acclimated to the infinite gratification that's beyond the darkness of this world, that doesn't separate us in the world, but circles back around where the divinity of the concreteness of sensory gratification, to take a sip of water, the smell of flower, to talk to somebody. You realize the divinity, the intimate immediacy of sensory experience like that, so that's my sense of that.

Jim Finley: The same process continues with the spirit, which it starts with... We focus on phase, and so what happens, we first... The mind is our thoughts about God, our reflections on God, our insights on God. Let's say they're revealed, let's say they're all true. Let's say it's all theologically sound. Then they say it is true. It's important, but it's finite.

Jim Finley: What God does, is that God very gently weans us off being satisfied with explanations for anything, and he talks about the nakedness of faith, and the image again with the faith is of a man born blind. We're told about the color yellow. He would know through fate the color

yellow exists, but since he was born blind, he had no essential knowledge of what the yellow is. He says, "So it is with faith." We say, "God is eternal. God is love. God is Trinity." All that is true, but we don't know what that means.

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

Jim Finley: We have ideas of what it means that are an echo of faith, but we're not going to spend all of eternity thinking about the Trinity. We're going to be passing beyond the frontiers of thought, the frontiers... And so that's what the dark night of faith is.

Jim Finley: Now, both the night of the sense and the night of the faith have a passive aspect and an active aspect. The passive aspect, it happens to you. All of a sudden you're rendered helpless to be gratified, helpless to grasp. The active night is you freely cooperate with that, because the ego resists it. It keeps trying to circle back to have it again, and you realize the more you keep doing that, it's getting more and more frustrated because this is no longer the place... That's what John of The Cross, as he was talking to the person for whom there's no longer where they are. And he talks about the risk of bad spiritual directors that don't understand this.

Jim Finley: They keep telling you, "Try harder." They don't realize that maybe the time has come, so you just quietly sit empty handed and open and receptive. That's how I would answer it then.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. That's helpful. In the dark night of the spirit, it's... You've said this numerous times, but no thought of God is God, so you come to the realization or the way you think about God doesn't fulfill you the way it used to or give you certainty, or-

Jim Finley: Yeah. Essentially, the cross is following Thomas Aquinas here, this classical sense that the powers of the spirit, the lower powers are through the sensors, through effect, through all the [inaudible 00:58:38]. The higher power are the intellect, the memory, and the will. The intellect is purified through faith, and the memory is purified through hope. The will is satisfied through charity, which is being infinitely in love with the infinite love that's infinitely in love with you, which is beyond effect, beyond... The higher powers of the soul, the dark night of the spirit are those higher... Are those, but the ones of the senses and the appetite because they were formed, they go together, but they're not separate, but he makes distinctions to clarify each one so we can then see how they're always together like that.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. That's really helpful. You've said before as well, that you end up asking more questions than having answers, and that's the things you notice.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Exactly. Then I think also what happens is, we ask a question that isn't met with an answer, but it's a question that's an openness in which we're graced with a realization thing, but it's a realization. Then also, I think another way to look at it, Thomas Merton when he says, he said, "We go along asking God all these questions, and so we think the idea is to get answers to our questions, so we read the mystics." I'm trying to get all these.

Jim Finley: Then it starts dawning on you that here all along, God is the one asking the question, and you don't know the answer to God's question. As a matter of fact, you don't even understand the question. He says, "We don't like moments like this, but that humility is where it starts." You know what I mean? It's being disarmed unexplainably, and gently, that's what these

teachings are about.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Well, thank you for taking some time to explain that Jim, that was helpful. Another technical question along those lines from Lynn, would you agree to the map of Evelyn Underhill, that there has to be an awakening experience before the dark night arises? She talks about Underhill's map, having these five components, awakening of self, purgation of self, illumination, the dark night of the soul, and the unitive life.

Jim Finley: Yeah. By the way, Evelyn Underhill, her book, *Mysticism*, is a real classic. If you're so inclined, if I would speak to you as Lectio, it would just quietly walk through that, because I think it's 500 pages or something, but she was a teaching mystic. It's really quite a beautiful book and [crosstalk 01:01:33]

Kirsten Oates: It's hard to find books like that with an overview of mysticism.

Jim Finley: Yeah, contemplative overview.

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

Jim Finley: And certainly that's one of them. In a way, the mystics do that.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: Mystically, in a way they're like the interior castle, that thing. But she's stepping back to give a contemplative overview of these contemplative thing, but she's doing it contemplatively [crosstalk 01:01:54]

Kirsten Oates: And across different mystics. She's trying to do all the threads.

Jim Finley: Yeah, exactly. Here's my sense of it. I'd put it this way. I say yes, with a caveat. I would say yes, and it begins with an awakening.

Kirsten Oates: Can you define what she means by awakening? When she says awakening?

Jim Finley: Yeah, you were going along living your life, and you were quickened. It was a sense of being unexplainably, not just in the presence of God, in the midst of nature, the arms of the beloved with the child alone at night quickened, but I think also, and maybe if there was a subtle way, you were quickened in realizing that the infinite presence of God is infinitely pressing as itself as the intimate immediacy of your very presence. In other words, you're quickened with oneness. You got a taste of all encompassing oneness. This maybe very subtle, like that comes in birth, comes in death, but there's a quickening like that.

Jim Finley: Then in that quickening, there's an aura of where it... The quickening lingers, and in the quickening and the lingering aura is the desire to abide in the oneness glimpsed, which is the path. I think people have these awakenings, but a lot of people don't have the gift of the desire to abide.

Jim Finley: Then you realize that in order to abide, you're going to have to give up a lot. This is Teresa of Avila, on the interior castle, on the second mansion, that you're not just... It isn't just when you entered the castle, you're careless when you got in there and reptiles got in with you,

with your habits of the mind and heart that compromise what your heart's looking for, but you realize you're raising the reptiles as pets. That you're carefully nursing the compromising of your heart-

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: ... Because you're afraid to let go of, or afraid to lose this control we think we have over the life we think that we're living and so on. Then we go, "Gosh!" It's like the question earlier about being a mystic. What if I don't want to... I don't know.

Jim Finley: Then you say, "Yes, there's no real choice for me. I just simply have to let go of what I know God is wanting me to let go, because it's holding me back. It's holding the people who love me back, it's in my way, so I have to with God's grace, work through that and move on and become a more grounded, psychological, spiritual maturity."

Jim Finley: Then in that willingness, an illumination happens, in which the original awakening starts habitually showing up and infusing itself in the intimate patterns of your mind and your thought and your emotions, and your life as a habituated, underlying like a... The gift that awakened you is transforming you into itself little by little, back and forth is the illumination of this.

Jim Finley: The illumination then is a dark night, which is the final death to everything less than an infinite union with the infinite love of God. It really is a mystical death, and it's a foreshadowing of what happens when we die really. A tremendous struggle ensues, because the survival strategy is so strong.

Jim Finley: For John of The Cross, this is The Dark Night of the Spirit. For Teresa, this is The Sixth Mansion. The Buddhists, call it the great death, you go through that. Then out of that comes the... What's the word that she uses? The last one is-

Kirsten Oates: Unitive.

Jim Finley: Unitive state.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: It's the God given godly nature of each passing moment of our life, unexplainably been pouring itself out, including pouring itself out as the divinity of the moment you're not aware of it, hat no one is aware of it. You are aware the divinity of that is ultimately just one thing that's happening, and it has taken you to itself. Then you realize you're called to live in the world that way, providentially, whether you're alone or you're... I would say yes.

Jim Finley: The only caveat I would add, and I think she says this too in other writings and she says, is that sometimes that original awakening isn't recognized as an awakening, but as a deprivation. For Teresa, it starts out as the fourth mansion. You're going along and you realize your heart's being enlarged to divine proportions, that's how it starts. Then the deprivation of loss and all that comes out of there.

Jim Finley: For John of The Cross, there's no initial awakening. It starts with a deprivation, and you

can't figure out what's happened. But the deprivation is actually her awakening, because if you don't panic and listen very closely, you can start to feel in the poverty of your awakened heart, the awakening you couldn't see coming because it was infinite.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, I see.

Jim Finley: Likewise, in *The Way of a Pilgrim*, we'll be doing *The Way of a Pilgrim* later in the series.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: If I live that long or or what, we'll see what God has in mind here. See, for *The Way of a Pilgrim*, how he starts out in the Greek Orthodox Byzantine tradition, is that he's at church on Sunday in Pentecost, and he reads in Paul, here's the reading from Paul, that we should pray always with uplifted hands. He walks out and he said, "Why do I do that?" Because I have to make a living. How is that even possible?

Jim Finley: The point is, he said the question forced itself up on my mind, and he could have no rest until... And he set out on a pilgrimage for the resolution of the question, so it didn't come to him as a grace.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: It came to him as a dilemma, but as he looked upon it, that was the grace. I think also in a lot of ways for people, they read... Like in AA, for example, having had a spiritual awakening as a result of living these steps. Here your grace came in realizing you were a drunk, that was the grace, so that was your most terrible moment of your life, because it's killing you and you can't stop. But here as you look back on it, when people share their story, recovery, strength, and hope in a whole room full of people, recovering alcoholics, they share how that terrible moment changed their whole life.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: A lot of trauma work is this way too. Sometimes the trauma deeply accepted and walked through, we serendipitously stumble into the grace of God sustaining us in the trauma.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: I would say, yeah, I agree with her, as long as we know the awakening isn't always experienced as an awakening, like the joyful thing.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: But seen as a paradoxical awakening, that's the initial deprivation that as we follow the path, we can see that it actually was her awakening.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). This reminded me of the way Richard Rohr, talks about great love and great suffering as the initiators of the path.

Jim Finley: Exactly. [crosstalk 01:09:48]

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Love or suffering beyond what our normal day-to-day ego can comprehend or cope with. Yeah.

Jim Finley: Yeah. And also to suffer meaning, the etymology, the word suffer is to undergo, so you suffer it, you yield to love's ways, you yield to the depth of your situation.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: You suffer it, because God suffers you, which is the... You know what I mean? It's the reciprocity of this suffering.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: That's [crosstalk 01:10:18]

Kirsten Oates: That opens up on the love.

Jim Finley: Yes, exactly.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. That's beautiful. Well, that's probably enough for today. Thank you for answering so many questions in such an in-depth beautiful way. Thank you again to everyone who sent in a question. Also Jim, we've got some beautiful... Some people who shared very profound and beautiful stories of their dark nights and they were a gift to read as well.

Jim Finley: Yeah, I read them, and very much so. That's the spiritual direction, probably like self-disclosure of how they experienced it or they're presently experiencing it. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful. Well, thanks for this season, Jim. Thanks for everything you're doing.

Jim Finley: Surely. Yes. Thanks to all of them. A joint thank you, and Corey, and the whole thing that makes this possible, and thanks to all of them too, without whom this wouldn't make any sense, so our gratitude goes back to them, and so yeah, gratitude all the way around.

Kirsten Oates: One last thank you to St. John of The Cross, for his beautiful work.

Jim Finley: Exactly. By the way, I want to end on that for just a moment. Look how often these people like John of The Cross, the world was changed by a person's willingness to surrender to a grace that at the time it broke loose in their life, they had no way of seeing the far reaching implications of this. That centuries later, people would still be touched by the sharing of what was given to them, and in some way that applies to us. You know what I mean? There's something very mysterious about that.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Okay.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful note to end on. Thank you.

Jim Finley: It is. Peace, bye. Thanks.

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'll see you again soon.