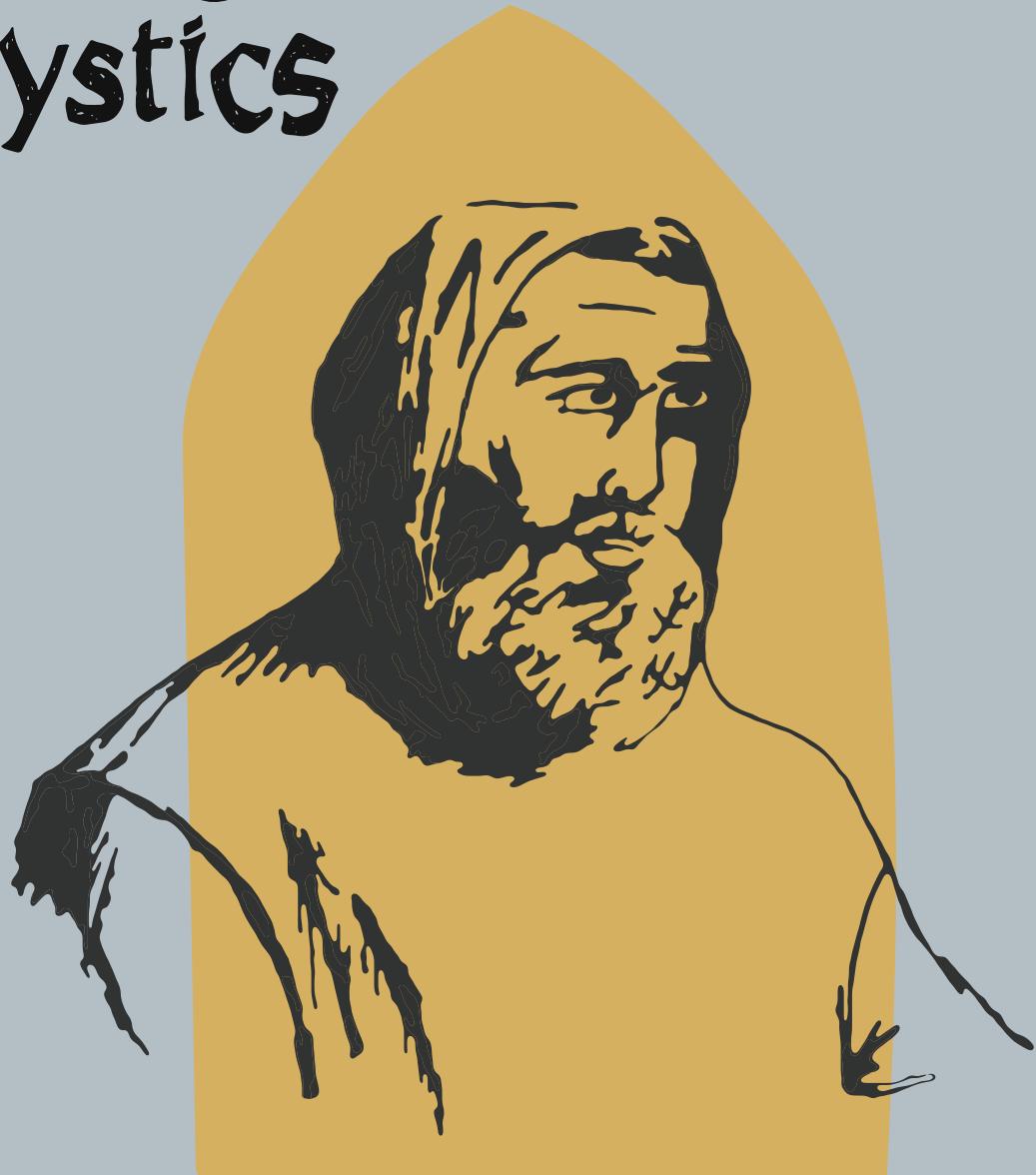


Turning to the Mystics



Guigo 11

Dialogue 1
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 season four of Turning to the Mystics, where we're turning to the 12th century mystic Guigo II. And I'm here with Jim. And we're going to dialogue about Jim's first session on Guigo's book, The Ladder of Monks. So, Jim, good to be with you.

Jim Finley: Same here. Yeah, it's nice.

Kirsten Oates: I did just want to start off by saying how moved I was by that first session, it was just beautiful. And how touching it is that this 12th century, cloistered monk could speak so clearly and deeply to us today.

Jim Finley: It's true.

Kirsten Oates: My first question is around the way you describe Guigo offering us distinct practical guidelines for prayer, that can open up on a prayerful experience of God's presence. So, I see myself as a beginner, and I'd like having guidelines. That's really helpful.

Kirsten Oates: But what made your session very powerful was you role modeling how you pray using the method. And in your role modeling, you weren't concerned about the guidelines, and you were pointing out to us, I did this and then I did that. You weren't kind of focused on that side of it. You were immediate with God, within the rhythm of the guidelines. So when you're a bit a beginner, how do you balance learning the guidelines with this, learning to be with God? Does that make sense, Jim?

Jim Finley: Yes, it does. And you can see all these mystics really, where their writings are really intended to be read as spiritual direction. And so, when we read them in the same attitude, no stance in which they wrote them, we're reading it and listening to it a spiritual direction.

Jim Finley: So what we're really doing, at the very heart of it is the sincerity of our desire to deepen our experience of in response to God's presence in our life. We know by faith that God is present in our life. And so, how do I go about deepening my experiential understanding of God's presence? I just don't know it in principle, but I'm actually kind of experiencing God's oneness with me.

Jim Finley: And so, we bring that sincerity. That's the desire that makes it authentic. Merton says, "With God, a little sincerity goes a long, long way." So we start out like, "Here I am, Lord. So as I was saying, we sit in a quiet place, we remind ourself in faith that God's here all about me and within me, closer to me than I am to myself."

Jim Finley: And so the first step in deepening my experience of God's presence in my life, is to listen to God personally speaking to me. Because my desire for God is an echo of God's desire for me. So, I take a text, preeminently it would be the scriptures, the Psalms with the gospels, or it would be like Guigo, from a mystic text. But when you read the text, you read it in a sense of faith, that God is personally speaking to you in the words that you're reading, which is

what makes it Lectio Divina, like divine reading.

Jim Finley: So you read it in devotional sincerity. So the reading is a kind of a prayer. And what you're really listening for here, is not information. But rather you're listening for how, as you slowly read it, your heart immediately recognizes the words that you're reading are beautiful.

Jim Finley: So, so if we hear Jesus say, "Fear not, I'm with you always." And if I believe in faith, that just as I sit there, the deathless presence of Jesus is telling me not to be afraid, because God's with me right in this moment and every moment of my life. That's a beautiful thing.

Jim Finley: And so, that's what it is really, is getting used to that attitude, no stance of being attentive in that way. Another example that I've used elsewhere, is imagine two people who are in this very intimate relationship, and she has to go off for a long time overseas or something. And they know they'll miss each other terribly. And so they write a love letter every day to each other.

Jim Finley: So the highlight of the day is opening each other's love letter and they read it. Well, here she gets unexpectedly come home, but she doesn't tell him she's coming home. And so, she's sitting outside of the house in her car down the street a little bit. And she sees him come out and get the mail out of the box. And she knows her love letter's there. And she's so excited to see him. And he doesn't know she's right across the street.

Jim Finley: And so, he sits on the sofa, and he opens it up and he reads. And in his love for her, everything she says touches him. He's just moved by the beauty of her words, because the beauty of her words are expressing her love for him. So he's practicing Lectio Divina.

Jim Finley: And she says something that sets in motion an inner reverie, images in his mind of union, and the moments they were together, they're going to be together, how much they love each other. And in a way he starts interiorly talking to her, things she's going to be writing to her in his next love letter, he's saying it. And he's engaging in meditation. It's a reflective process back and forth with her.

Jim Finley: And then what emerges in him, is the desire for union. She also stirs up in him, the desire to hold her, to be one with her, to look into her eyes for them to be one with each other. And that's his prayer.

Jim Finley: And as he's doing that, she quietly comes to the front door, and as he's expressing these desires, the one who wrote the letter comes walking into the room. He looks up at her saying nothing, is contemplation.

Jim Finley: And so, Scripture is a love letter from God. We see it as a love letter from God. And so, the Lectio Divina, then is sincerity of hearing God personally speaking to us, in the beauty of these words. And we develop that stance of sustained attentiveness, in this receptive openness of love, and we're cultivating the habit of learning to be that way with God.

Kirsten Oates: Wow, that's a really helpful metaphor for what you've been describing. Thank you for sharing that. It reminds me actually, when I was dating my husband, we dated long distance, and I was in Australia, and he was in America. And there's very few hours, where we were both awake at the time. So we would write emails while the other one was asleep. And so, I'd wake

up and have a brand new email from Hal, waiting in my inbox and then vice versa. And it was a beautiful rhythm.

Jim Finley: It is. So, Guigo would say that's like a sacrament of God's relationship with us. And so, we consciously cultivate. And then we can see that we have to develop the habit to do that. Because we're so used to running off. But there is this idea of just staying with it, just like continue reading slowly, we're to go back and start all over again. But it's a sustained receptivity to letting this word come in, and let it touch her heart, with his personal words of love that God is personally speaking to us in these words. And then we're in this stance, which is the first rung of the ladder to heaven.

Kirsten Oates: You said Jim, this whole practice is about deepening my experience of God's presence, and learning to listen to God. And I wonder for beginners, that if this is kind of a, we're entering into something new. I noticed how you start with words of assurance and reassurance when you begin the practice, and saying, "We know by faith that God is in us and all around us." Those sorts of things. Do you think that's an important place to start before even doing the reading?

Jim Finley: I do. I really do. And I think the reason is, sometimes, say if we attend church regularly and so on if we do, you hear it so often you don't really listen to it anymore. And so, we know by faith, and the Word of Jesus is like this too, the Psalms. But we have to sign off on it. That is, we have to remind ourselves experientially, that I personally know in my heart that this is true. I may not feel it right now, or, Lord, I might not feel your presence with me now. But I know by faith that you are right now one with me, seeking me. And I'm here with a rendezvous between us. So that what I know in principle, I might experience actually know like as a felt sense, by listening to your words of love to me.

Kirsten Oates: I do find that one of the hardest things to remember, I think, just because of the way my attention operates. But sit down, start the practice, I've got 20 minutes. And so, this piece of, the intention, or the attention I'm bringing to the practice, I need to remind myself of that.

Jim Finley: I want to make another compare. These mystics like Guigo, John of the Cross and so on, they're often called Northshore mystics, because they say married love is the primary metaphor for this.

Jim Finley: So let's say in a marriage, let's say there's certain moments where the two people kind of spontaneously get flashes of their renewed awareness of their love for each other. Little simple gestures, words of kindness. There's just little moments throughout the day, they get these little reassuring things.

Jim Finley: But they also know that she says to him, "Maybe you're busy, I'm busy, we're both busy." And if we just leave it to chance, like in passing on the way to something else, I don't know if that's enough for us.

Jim Finley: And therefore, why don't we make a commitment to a daily time, or once a week or something? Let's sit down, and there's no agenda, but intimacy. There is no agenda, but vulnerability. There's no agenda but caring for each other. There's no agenda

but renew the affection for each other. Because if we keep leaving it by chance, the demands of the day will keep whittling away at it.

Jim Finley: And it's interesting, when I do marriage counseling with people. Sometimes they have to go on a vacation to be intimate, because at home, with the phone and everything else, it's like I don't know. So you have to decide, so there's these moments you've been touched by something. And so, it's an inner act of the will that I'm going to, it's an act of freedom really. I'm going to pause and take a hiatus from the momentum of the day, just take 10 minutes. And with childlike sincerity, I'm going to sit, turn to God and open my heart to God's presence in my life.

Jim Finley: So, it's in the purity of my intention, that when I read the words in the Scripture, whatever, I'm listening to God personally telling me that, that I might take it to heart with His presence.

Kirsten Oates: What I'm also hearing in that Jim, too, is, it's not an intention to get anywhere, or to be transformed, or to grow. It's an intention to be in relationship.

Jim Finley: Exactly. It's just like the couple again, they don't come up front with something they hope they're going to happen. Emotional fireworks, and there's going to be bliss and so on.

Jim Finley: Likewise, let's say a mother or father reading their small child a good night story, there's no ulterior motive. They're not sitting there hoping they're going to have some profound experience. It's more than enough to sit next to their child reading a good night's story. And prayer is a lot like that. There's no need for something more. Because what's so simply given is more than enough. And I think we're trying to calibrate our heart to a fine enough scale, that we can begin to tune into that, like the subtlety of it. The delicacy of it.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. I love that image of reading the good night's story. And same story over, and it's not like they're growing and learning it.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: And holding on to it, that they can hear the same story for months over and over.

Jim Finley: Yeah. And they hand it to you over and over and over. And what's interesting, an adult ego consciousness, you're going to [inaudible 00:14:56], I know it by heart. But that's not the point.

Kirsten Oates: That's not the point.

Jim Finley: The point is how delighted you are, in the delight that the child is taking. And then you even help the child, there's a picture there, words that the child points to it. Oh, that's right. And you're kind of reveling in the innocent transparency of this child, knowing that when we pray, God's reveling in us that way.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And we're reveling in God's love for us. It has a lot more to do with that level, with the intimate immediacy of the sincerity of resting and opening ourselves to that.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. It's not the book that you're reading. It's the way you're connecting-

Jim Finley: Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: ... in the reading of the book.

Jim Finley: When I was in the monastery, they changed the psalter every week, the Psalms. And seven days a week, changed the Psalms. So, some of those monks there, they've been there for over 50 years, chanting the Psalms everyday. And repetition is not redundancy. Because someone once said when we sing a hymn, we sing a joyful human to the Lord. When we chant, we deepen the capacity to listen.

Jim Finley: So in a way, chanting is a kind of like prayer for echoing back the words of the Psalm. Like we say, "Beside restful waters you lead me oh Lord." And in a way, God's own words to us are on our lips.

Jim Finley: And then when you realize you're speaking God's words, you realize you and God are united in the rhythms of those words. And that's how to read the gospels that way, or to say it, like whisper it out loud. You yourself are saying God's actual words to you. And so, this is like devotional sincerity on the first rung of this ladder.

Jim Finley: Likewise, anytime I think when we're losing our way we get confused. We can always return to the first rung of the ladder. We always are willing to start over in the sincerity of this childlike reawakening in our self. It was always there.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. The other relationship that's coming to mind for me is, with my grandmother who died about 10 years ago, but her letters and the things she gave me, there's something about those things that still hold a connection to her presence.

Jim Finley: Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: And when I'm hearing you talk about scripture, there's something reminding me of that.

Jim Finley: That's really true. I do the same thing with my grandmother, or something that she wrote to me when I was in the monastery, and I'll come across it, and I'll read it out loud to myself. And it brings her presence back. And yeah, exactly.

Kirsten Oates: Can you talk a little bit about the difference between practicing the guidelines and entering into what you called graced evolving states of consciousness?

Jim Finley: Let me start with practicing the guidelines, first. I want to use an example. Let's say someone, they realize they're drawn to art, to draw or to paint. Or it could be to be a poet, like poetry, it could be music.

Jim Finley: So let's say if they're going to pursue that, like in a committed way, they have to learn the craft of art, for example, perspective, primary, secondary colors. And under guidance, they have to internalize the craft.

Jim Finley: But as they internalize the craft, it's just the replication of something. I don't know if they do this anymore. When I was little, they had these cards, it was like a picture, a windmill or something. And there was like colored yarn. And number one would be yellow, and you put yellow and number two, and you'd get a windmill every time.

Jim Finley: So what happens, you learn the craft, but at a certain point... See, the art is where it catches fire. The craft is in the service of refined eloquence that lets art express itself. When I was in therapy, I used to talk about the anarchy or the ineffable. See, that somehow you're kind of being led by something. Poets talk this way too when they do poetry.

Jim Finley: But I also think the words of lovers, i also think words of deep healing. When people are in the midst of therapy, there's a spontaneous flow. And the therapist is really there listening, that's the art. But they had to learn the craft of detached listening. They had to pace time of interventions.

Jim Finley: But that craft is in the service of enhancing the efficacy of the encounter. And I think the prayer's that way, too. So there is a method, because in a way Lectio is a method, you have to sit down, you can practice it, practice it. But it gets real, and all of a sudden, that craft takes hold, as you can actually hear God saying that to you, just telling you not to be afraid.

Jim Finley: And the second rung of the ladder is meditation. And then that evokes a kind of journaling, like a loving dialogue, where God says, in a Lectio, "And I spoke to you, it's your turn. What do you think?"

Jim Finley: And God's infinitely listening to every word you say, because God's really into you. It's kind of infinitely in love with you. Like, what do you think? And you tell God, "See, I'm afraid a lot." I mean, it's back and forth, back and forth.

Jim Finley: And so, what you're really doing, is that it's the reflective mind illumined by faith, as an internalized experiential understanding of this exchange, back and forth.

Jim Finley: So first, we listen. And then, when we speak, we just don't speak off somewhere else. We speak in response to what God just said to us, as it's given to us to understand it. Maybe it's filled with all kinds of distortions. And so God's infinitely in love with us in the midst of our distortions. But little by little over time, it gets clearer, and clearer, and clearer as years and months go by.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: And also another thing about these steps to the ladder, is that, although they happen in prayer, little by little, what happens, is they become habitual throughout the day. There's as an underlying, you just catch yourself in certain moments of attentiveness, like a Lectio mind, or a certain moment of a little inner quiet dialogue between you and God, where something is happening right now. Like this. We're in the prayer.

Jim Finley: And that's what we're really looking for here, is contemplative character transformation. It starts becoming, how to become a contemplative person. I feel that deep down I am and I'm called to be. And so prayer is the rendezvous point. Like this axis of the wheel that kind of permeates out through the day.

Kirsten Oates: Wow, that's beautiful. What did you call it? Like a contemplative character, like a conversion.

Jim Finley: Yeah, contemplative character transformation. What you're really [inaudible 00:23:13], is, how do I become a contemplative person? See, how do I become someone for whom contemplative attentiveness has become a kind of a more and more habitual state, that I bring to everything that happens to me throughout the day?

Jim Finley: And even when things are jarring, which they are, life is life. As soon as you get a little breather, you can tempt to reflect on why it was jarring. And maybe it was jarring because it was jarring. You were just true to the moment. But then, instead of letting it run off with you, you're going to ruminate over it friends spin out.

Jim Finley: You use contemplative to bring it to God, to put it into a context. Like, why did this person say this, and what's going on? And how do I set a boundary? It's like a powerful discernment, as a powerful contemplative person living your daily life.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. And that sense of trust that even in those moments, we're not abandoned by God. So how do I reinstate that sense of connection to God?

Jim Finley: Exactly. And it's interesting too, Guigo, that's how he starts out. He begins by, in this letter he is writing, he's saying, "One day while I was working with my hands, it came to me that there's like a ladder to heaven." And he's alluding here to scripture, like Jacob's ladder with angels ascending and descending. 'And it came to me as for rung.' So all this came to him while he was trimming the shrubs. And he went, "Oh, this is pretty good." And so, as soon as we're open this way, things come to us. It comes as a dream, or it comes as an intuitive thing. Just things come to us.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Even ways to more deeply connect with God as well.

Jim Finley: Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: Insights.

Jim Finley: That's exactly right.

Kirsten Oates: So Jim, what I'm hearing is, practicing the guidelines, you used the word craft and art, but learning the craft is important. And it's okay to spend time focusing, I'm trying this out, I'm following the steps. But the desire is for this these moments of breakthrough, where God meets us, or we meet God in these. Is that what you're calling the graced states of consciousness?

Jim Finley: Yes. I want to say something. See, I think sometimes we learn the crafts of things on our own. And sometimes we have more facility than others, in certain things, trial and error. But then we learn whether it's learning how to cook, or paint watercolors, are pray.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: What we learn is, we can learn something from somebody who's been down the road always. And someone who helps us out so we don't reinvent the wheel all over again by trial and

error. Someone like Guigo, these mystics mistakes, they've been there. And we can sit in their presence, and they can help us to learn the craft that releases the grace.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Oh, that's beautiful. And I like these metaphors you're giving us, because if I wanted to learn art, I'm going to go to an artist who knows how to teach art and has committed their life to art, or if I want to learn poetry, I want to go to a poet. But if I want to learn prayer, Guigo was someone steeped in prayer.

Jim Finley: Exactly. For a while I lived in South Bend, Indiana near Notre Dame University. And my two daughters were, I don't know, maybe like 12, or nine, or so. 10, whatever they were. And there was a portrait artist there in South Bend, Indiana. She did a lot of portraits for Notre Dame Big Oil portraits of significant figures there.

Jim Finley: And I went to her home and paid her to do a portrait of my daughters. And so I took my oldest daughter first, I think she was 10. And she had a studio in the back of her house. And she sat Kelly down. And she had windows all around the back, it was all natural light. And she took a lot of pictures of her first. And she had a big easel of paper and blue pastel chalk. And she just sat and gazed at my daughter for around five minutes. Picked up the blue pastel chalk, and Kelly's face came out on the paper.

Kirsten Oates: Wow.

Jim Finley: And if I would have interrupted her like, "Stop, stop stop." How do you do that? It's pretty amazing. Other than me disturbed, me for interrupting her. She would say, "I don't know how I do that." But she had to invest and commit herself to that over years. And I think that's the thing, when the flow starts. John Cage once said, "Creativity doesn't really begin until the creative person gets to the point they no longer understand what they're doing." And all of a sudden, I mean, there's a spontaneous.... But it's the fruit of internalized craft to move.

Jim Finley: And so, we're saying just like we can do that with marriage, or living alone, or spending a long time alone in the midst of nature, or teaching elementary school or something, we give ourselves to something, and it gives itself to us. And so we can do this with God. That's the point.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, that's really helpful.

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

Kirsten Oates: So in a way, it's like I start off, I'm new to Lectio. I'm starting off not really understanding what I'm even doing. And as I learn the craft, and I enter into these more grace states of consciousness, then I don't know what I'm doing in a different kind of way. So the ego not knowing what it's doing in the method, but then the spontaneous awareness that comes.

Jim Finley: Yes. And I think there's another practical thing here too, for beginners. It isn't as if you listen to this, you say, "I'm going to do it." It's far more, light a little candle and take off.

Jim Finley: And what you discover when you sit there, the busyness of your distracting mind has implied the step away outside the door, so you can pray. You're sitting there with grocery

lists, and phone calls. So you kind of have to practice focusing on the Lectio, with those distractions. Because if you're waiting for the distractions to stop, you'd never do it.

Jim Finley: So there's a kind of a secondary way. Sometimes if they're so strong, you might have to attend to it, like write it down or something, put it aside. And you remind yourself, all that matters, I'll get to all of that. But in the midst of all that, I'm here for this. Lord, you told me not to be afraid. And I'm going to meditate now with you, Lord. You know what I'm afraid of? Looking at how this is going so far, I'm afraid this isn't going to work for me. That's what I'm afraid of. You know what I mean? I don't know if I'm cut off for this.

Jim Finley: And God says back, "I mean, gee, you just started two days ago. What do you expect? Why don't you hang in there for a while and give us a chance." But I think if you said to her every day with childlike sincerity, not keeping score, just give yourself it, within three to four months, you start to realize a shift would have already started to happen. This facility to kind of be quietly sustained in this Lectio stance, the discursive dialogue, the desire, I think is slowly internalized like that.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, beautiful. Well, this season is really going to help us be clear on how to get into that kind of a practice. So I'm grateful for that. And I was thinking about that three month period, it would be kind of in the midst of Christmas, we'd be coming into, to a little bit more of a rhythm and understanding of how it all works.

Jim Finley: Really, by the way, another thing to consider, if you want to decide what's best for them. But a very traditional thing, say in the Christian tradition, and in the Catholic tradition, is the liturgical year. And so, with advent, like the coming of Christ, and the readings, as the Lectio, for advent. Because what we're doing in advent, we're waiting for that which has already occurred, because Christ is born. But it hasn't been fully born in our heart. See. Like preparing our heart for this arrival point.

Jim Finley: And so, as soon as each of these seasons of the liturgical year for some people, they find that helpful to make that part of the pattern of their prayer life.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, that's helpful, Jim. So this is good timing to learn this Lectio practice. Well, Jim, I did want to go through the method a little bit, to kind of step by step, as if I'm speaking to my spiritual director Guigo II.

Jim Finley: Okay.

Kirsten Oates: When you say it's like spiritual direction, what you mean Jim is, like a one on one and making it very personal. Is that what you mean by that?

Jim Finley: That's right. Also I think this really happened, I think it was with Merton this way. See, it was such a privilege to sit with Thomas Merton, because I saw him as one of these people. I saw him as a lineage holder and as a living mystic teacher.

Jim Finley: And so with Guigo too. He was living in Mississippi. So I think what happens to these people, they say, "We so benefit from your ability to put words to these things, your ability for guide, but you're not going to be here forever. So, I wonder if you'd be willing to leave us like a legacy, that after you're no longer with us on the physical plane, the wisdom of what

you've learned from God, we might prayerfully read it, and you'll still be helping us."

Jim Finley: And that's how I see what this is. And then what we're doing here, because it's so intuitively dense, it's not complicated or academic, but it's so intuitively pure. That's what these podcasts are about. We need help to like tease it out. Because it's too pure. It's too like this, but by teasing it out and dialoguing about it, like we're doing, and with examples, then you can start to get your footing. You'd find your way in what's going on here.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. You think with just 17 pages, being like, read that? Got that? But like you say, it's a life long learning.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: So Jim, you talked about coming to the place of prayer, and starting off with the sense of renewing our faith. And I just wondered about things like where we sit, and you've talked about, should we light a candle? Have a have some kind of sacramental icon or something. What are your thoughts on that?

Jim Finley: Let's say first of all, of course, we can pray anywhere, of course. But there's something to what you're saying right now. We live here at the ocean, and there's a front porch out here, the oceans right there.

Jim Finley: And so, Maureen and I, every night, we'd sit out there and watch the sun go down. So soon as it was time to head for the port to watch the sun go down, the very act of walking out there together, it was already beginning. So let's say you have a place to pray. In your room, you have the scriptures there, whatever icon, whatever you do. Knowing that that's the place where the rendezvous happens. There's something about walking there. It's already started.

Kirsten Oates: Wow, yeah.

Jim Finley: Like, why am I even walking to sit in this chair? What's the meaning of the time I'll be spending there? So there's something about the familiarity of the details of the place, like this. And that can be very helpful to people.

Kirsten Oates: I think just something like a ritual of lighting a candle, or pulling out the icon, it slows us down a bit, doesn't it? It kind of gets the rhythm into a bit of a slower, more concentrated, space.

Jim Finley: It really does. So, I almost always light a candle. I love the rosary a lot, just to hold, i kind of learn that in the monastery. And so, i wrap the rosary on my hands, and light the candle, and open the texts.

Jim Finley: And especially now what I do mainly is, I'll take a classical text like this, or writing that I'm doing. And so my meditation is listening on how to put words to this. Like, how could I say this, to make this more accessible to people, and writing it longhand very slowly, with a lot of pauses in between? And because in order to do that, I have to listen to the text. And I have to listen to God speaking to me in the text.

Jim Finley: And then I have to let my meditatio be a shared meditatio. So, it's really whether you're

journaling, or whatever you're doing, there's the place, and then there are certain patterns you learned. It's like your soul almost recognizes them and moves... It's like a dog. Anyone who has a dog, you get the leash and shake the leash, the dog is all excited, because they know what's about to happen. So that's what happens to our soul. You light your candle, and your soul kind of [inaudible 00:38:38], while you take a walk with the Lord.

Jim Finley: So there's a kind of sincerity of the rituals, I think. The deepening familiarity of the configuration of things. And you kind of internalize that.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. And you gave us a hint in your session around, that journaling might be a great way to do the back and forward, especially as a beginner.

Jim Finley: That's really true.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, to have a place to land with the meditation and the prayer.

Jim Finley: That's right. And some nuancing might be, like modes of journaling. One, you heard what God says to you. Like the texts I use with the students is, "Fear not, don't be afraid I'm with you always."

Jim Finley: So, in the first level of journaling, it might be, what if I would paraphrase your words to be, what if I would echo you telling me not to be afraid, how would I say what you're telling me, talking to me?

Jim Finley: Then what I'm going to do is, I want to say back what comes to me about, I wonder about this, I wonder about that? What about that. This reminds me of this, it reminds me of that. And again, you have to be true to yourself, some people it doesn't help them to write, is a distraction then don't do it. But for some people by writing it out, and I suggest longhand rather than a typewriter. But if it computer's your thing, then use your computer.

Jim Finley: Because what you're doing with the candle, and what you're doing with the word, is your whole being is engaged. Like your body's engaged. You're absorbed, you're kind of right there. And then as you're writing this out, you would naturally pause, just as you did in the Lectio, you'd be writing something and you pause, and the pause is a beginning of the tastes of contemplation, is like wordlessly resting in the echoes of the beauty of the words. And that would give rise to the prayer, to the heart's desire. Like help me with this, or sustain me in this, like that. And you just keep doing that over, and over, and over, until it starts becoming part of you.

Kirsten Oates: I liked that you talked about the process not being linear, and that you're reflecting that. And what you're saying right now is that, you move between the modalities, just like in a relationship, you can't coerce someone to go in a linear way with you.

Jim Finley: That's right.

Kirsten Oates: If it's true relationship, it's a media and flowing, and, yeah.

Jim Finley: And we might have said in a previous session, when I was studying medieval philosophy at the monastery, St. Maritain atomistic philosopher, who wrote a book called The degrees

of Knowledge, and levels of knowing. And he says in the order of the problematic, like problem solving, the mind moves in a horizontal line. Like one plus one plus one equals (like that). He said, but with mystery, it's not like that. In mystery, the mind pauses in a single place, and the image he uses is on a spiral staircase, around a hidden axis of loving presence.

Jim Finley: And so, every time you swing around on a qualitatively deeper place of the word you just said. And that's why married love again, when one says to the other, "I love you." The other one doesn't say, "You say that all the time. You're so redundant. Honestly, God, I want to hear something new." Why do they keep saying it over and over? Because every time they say it, it recreates the possibility of rediscovering together, the love that gives meaning to everything they do with each other.

Jim Finley: And I think that's the way these words with God are, also, it's a deepening throughout our life, really, a repetition. Non redundant repetition.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. So, we've potentially sat in now, and lit a candle. And then just that reminded to focus on opening up to this rendezvous of God, and this reassurance of God being present with us, and that kind of lays the ground for the practice itself. Yeah.

Jim Finley: That's right. And also nothing that I don't do at the monastery is to bow.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, nice.

Jim Finley: Fold your hands and bow. And like Shunryū Suzuki we do that with the sittings too, when we bow we give ourselves up. So the least and the most we can do is give ourselves up to the grace of even desiring to do this at all. The God's grace, and we bow, and then we begin. Just start in.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, that's beautiful. I really like that idea of bowing. So then, you talked about reading, and Scripture as a love letter from God as one place we can turn to. You were saying to you often read these mystics, who are reflecting on their deep reading of Scripture, in what they write and their experience of God through their practices. And you used this phrase to read in a stance of attentive listening, infused with love.

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: Can you explain that?

Jim Finley: He spend a lot of monasteries trying to be all these woods, and you spend a lot of time walking in the woods like this. So, in one of his passages, he says, "although I have walked in those woods, how can I claim to love them? One by one, I shall forget the names of individual things." See, my imposed name on things, instead of who God names him to be, and who they eternally are in God's mine and so on.

Jim Finley: "You who sleep in my breast are not met with words, who are dispossession within dispossession. That is, in being so deeply access by your love for me, I've been dispossessed on my ability to live on my own terms without you. And I'm so being woven into you, transforming me into yourself. In silence, I've been dispossessed of my ability to do that."

Jim Finley: Then he says, "But then you go on to that way for a while, and you kind of get used to being dispossessed." Like you get the hang of it, or they write a book or two about it, or something. And so there's dispossession within dispossession. You kind of go along, and you wake up some morning and your dog is dead, or there's a huge storm, or you meet somebody, or a loved one died. There's a turn of events, and you're dispossessed again. But every time you're dispossessed, it renews the awareness, you're unexplainably, possessed by God, sustaining you. Like that.

Jim Finley: And so, to me what really helps me, listening to things like this, the mystics, is what we're waiting for, are certain insights that touch us. It's like a nonlinear pause and the awakening heart, recognizing in the words, innuendos, or reverberations of a desire. And then resting in that desire, and then telling God about the desire. And then go back and read the words again, and then continue on. And so, you're always kind of in the rhythm, where it kind of stays heartfelt, like you kind of sit with it, sit with it, sit with it. And it's kind of like that.

Kirsten Oates: So what I'm hearing this stance of attentive listening infused with love, it's like I'm opening myself to love impacting me. And I'm looking for love. And I'm letting it impact me. And I'm offering love. And it's like a dance of love with what you're reading and what you're opening to.

Jim Finley: That's really it. And see, and I think then, and that's when the scripture isn't just a book, it's God's Word. With a mystic, just isn't something you're curious about, but you kind of sense that the depths from which the mystic is speaking to you is accessing those same depth in you. And it can come as a lover, and sometimes it isn't felt as a love, it's sometimes felt as you kind of stopped short. Like, you don't know what to make of it. Like you're kind of, you're right in the immediacy of something, and so you just stay there without answers.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And then let God know you don't know where to go next. Tell God that, like that. And then you go back and you start again, in a cycle. It's like a long conversation with an intimate friend. It has its deepening, transformative sincerity that takes you down into this very place you're trying to get to. This habituated stance.

Kirsten Oates: And over time, it doesn't always happen in one conversation.

Jim Finley: No, it doesn't. Nothing does.

Kirsten Oates: What you're describing reminds me of, even just listening to your first session, and preparing for today, it's a time to stop and rewind, listen again, stop, rewind. Because there's a certain way I can't understand many things you're saying, but I know they're important, and I kind of want to learn more, or sit with them a little longer.

Jim Finley: That's it. And so, that's why in a way, I think it's very close to listening to music. There's a certain fecundity, or a certain richness in the words. And what you're really doing is you read, you're being moved by the richness of the language. But the richness of the language is God's voice. And you keep going back, and going back, and going back.

Jim Finley: And again, people decide kind of what people are moved to do. And so, if you're moved to

take one of these mystics we've been looking at, and find the commentary, like doing deep Bible study, same way. Get the commentary, and you pray, and you go back to the text and unhurriedly, you're not in a hurry. You'll be dead soon anyway. I mean, it's a kind of a fleeting thing going on, you're trying to get little glimmers of something. And so, you kind of sit there, and you open the text, or you open your notes, and you learn to cherish it where you left off, and it kind of gets inside of you. And you walk around with it.

Kirsten Oates: And that's helpful. I did have a question on discernment around helping people find what they should be using for their own practice. But I'm hearing in what we've already spoken about that, if there is the type of texts that makes your heart take a pause, and disarms you in ways. You're not looking for something you really understand, and you really feel like you know already. It's like a-

Jim Finley: And that's why I think some people are listening to these talks. These talks are more than enough. Just to be out walking, put in your earphones and listen to it and you're touched by it. And you sit somewhere for a few minutes, and listen to another one. And it's like a gentle visitation. And so, to your own self be true. You kind of move with what's given to you to move with.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, that's helpful. I mean, I love this podcast as a practice. And you can listen to the sessions over and over. Like you say, repetition isn't redundancy.

Jim Finley: That's true. Sometimes at night when I can't sleep, I'll listen to Krista Tippett, or a different thing. But what really puts me to sleep is listening to my own podcast. I definitely get this very deep dream sleep. But there's something to that, I think. You know what I mean? There's something about it. We're used to listening to things up here. But you can tell the language is coming from somewhere down here. There's something somatic about it. I mean, there's something like a boundary crossing that is hard, is disarmingly simple is what it is, I think. I rejoice in that.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. There's something in the body that when it hears this kind of truth, like your whole physicality can relax around it. Like, I'm going to be okay. There's like a, yeah.

Jim Finley: And that's why I think we're moved like a liturgy is well done. We're chanting is well done. You just sit and being moved by it is the message. I mean, it engages your whole self.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: That's why Bernard Lonergan says, "When it comes to religion, religion's a lot closer to falling in love than it is to proving something." If all there was in life was everything that we proved, or go to prove if we keep trying. Life is pretty claustrophobic. We're trying to find something rich enough to live by. And here we're saying it's infinite.

Kirsten Oates: I like what you were saying earlier about translating this practice, then into life as Lectio. Because I think for a lot of people, life does feel pretty claustrophobic.

Jim Finley: I think it does.

Kirsten Oates: And so, a practice like this is training us to find this kind of meaningful, more purposeful,

more connected place.

Jim Finley: Because not only do we not live in a society anymore, like some indigenous peoples in ancient times, in the rhythms of this. We almost live in a society that makes it difficult for us to do this. And as I said, this feeling that we're skimming over the surface of the depths of the life that we're living. And so, unless we choose to like pause and reclaim our right to drop into the intimacy of this depth and live by it, it won't happen. We know our heart wants us to do it.

Kirsten Oates: Moving on to the meditation. And Guigo's encouragement is that, the meditation perceives. So I liked what you said about this spontaneous movement. You said you might spontaneously move from this first run to the second run, which for me says I might have planned to read a page or a chapter, but I might in the first sentence suddenly have a response, or something to meditate on. Is that right, Jim?

Jim Finley: Yeah. I want to use an example. Let's say you're having a long intimate conversation over dinner with a friend about substantive matters, about life, or either one of you what you're going through. And I say as you listen to every word they say, it's like Lectio consciousness.

Jim Finley: And then something comes to mind. Like as an insight that they might help, or something reminds you of something strangely that you're going through similar. And as soon as your heart tells you not to say it yet, not to impose yourself, or not to interrupt them, but to let it play itself out. And so same with prayer, I think we do the Lectio. And we can feel something rising up within us. Like something to tell God about, or to ask God about. We know God infinitely already knows it. But somehow, knowing God's listening to us, helps us to hear it better.

Jim Finley: So, as soon as we know to hold back on it a little bit, just keep listening. And then there's a certain tipping point where we quite naturally pause, it doesn't disrupt something. I put it, it's almost the mind expressing what's received in silence. And you start expressing this to God, you say something, you write it out, you ask, and you pause again, and then you listen for an inner response. And then there's more Lectio. So, there's a kind of an unforced naturalness about it, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. What I'm hearing in that is, because quite often in conversation, you feel something, you react to something, or something reminds you of something, and often people aren't great listeners. And we tend to insert pretty quickly into a conversation. And so, part of this practice is, again, slowing down and listening more deeply, I guess, is the best phrase that's coming to mind.

Jim Finley: Yes. I think therapy has really helped me with this too, in the sense of... But I think we let any deep love relationship helps us with this. Is, we learn when we share something very deep with a friend, we're not necessarily looking for an answer. We're not necessarily looking for advice.

Jim Finley: What they're concerned about, is that you really hear not just what they're saying, but you hear them. And this requires you put in advance your own things that are coming up, to let them know that when they spoke, they were heard. Like Merton says, "In the spiritual life to understand means we're infinitely understood. And a see, is to see that we're seen." And so,

there's something like that going on here.

Kirsten Oates: Staying open to deeply listening to God, while knowing God's wanting us to respond, desiring us to be in the relationship authentically.

Jim Finley: Exactly. And the other side works also. Let's say the person opens up and risk sharing something they never shared before. And you're sitting there having dinner, and the only thing you have to say, "Would you please pass the salt?" Or you're watching TV over their shoulder while they talk, it's disconcerting. You can tell when someone's not there.

Jim Finley: And so, there's the artistry of love, and knowing not to impose. There's also knowing when love asks of us to speak. And I think we learned that with God, too. There's a kind of flow back and forth, like a deepening affinity with each other in our heart.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Wow. There's a real learning curve of relationship in this practice. It's beautiful.

Jim Finley: Nice.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, I noticed too, when you roll modeled, going through the steps, you kind of came back around even to that initial assurance and reassurance. And so, I noticed even when you were meditating, you reminded yourself, God, I know you're here. I know you're listening. I know you care. And I thought that was beautiful in the meditation.

Jim Finley: Yeah. I love what Merton says to the novices on one of the talks. He said, "A prayer begins in just knowing we belong to God." Now, there's that in us that knows it, which is the self that prays. But there's also that in us that doesn't know it yet. We give our assent to it.

Jim Finley: But the density and intensity of internalized trauma, and abandonments, and concerns, closes off experiential access to that reassurance. So, I might be sitting in prayer, feeling very confused. And if I'm not careful, I give my confusion authority, of an understanding of why I am here.

Jim Finley: And so, if I pause to say, "Lord, I realize how confused I am. But I know you're never confused. You're certainly never confused about who I am in your presence. And you're never confused in thinking that my inabilities, or any way whatsoever, any hindrance to being infinitely in love with me."

Jim Finley: So there's something about saying that. And by the way, it's like in Jesus's words, often the words of Jesus are words of this reassurance kind of a depth of reassurance. And so, I think little, by little, by little, we let ourselves learn to live in that reassurance. And then the net part of it gets deeper, keeps circling back around and be there for the aspects of us that are still afraid.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: And then we know that everyone's their own unique edition of the same thing. There's a ground in them, and they have their own version of losing their way. It takes one to know one. So by listening to them, by caring about them, maybe in that encounter can pass on something to help them get their footing in their own life. And I think that's where that

starts to affect our relationships with other people.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. The next rung on the ladder is prayer. And Guigo says, "Prayer asks." And so, this prayer is really about desire. And I guess the thread through all of this is building this relational quality with God, this relational experience of God. And so, your prayers certainly centered around that. And is that the encouragement, that we're not just praying? Because often prayer is praying about a circumstance, or praying-

Jim Finley: Yeah. There is one way to put words to it. Say like talking to God. I'm really grateful for how I'm learning to let your words of loving union with me access my heart. It's good. And I'm also grateful in the meditation for the insights that I gained, that come to me that I write out and I listened to.

Jim Finley: But what's missing in all of this, is a full experience of you taking me to yourself. A matter of fact, the more I engage in Lectio, the meditatio, less fulfilled my longings are. For that stirs up my longings for this oneness with you. And I can't be one with you without you. I'm looking for union. Insights are great.

Jim Finley: It'd be almost like the person reading the love letter. I mean, he's so delighted to see her. And as appreciative as those letters, the letters without her don't quite do it. You read them over and over all this is really amazing. But to tell you the truth, nothing like the oneness with the beloved.

Jim Finley: And so, I think the prayer is that, it's a consummation of a longing is resolved in love. Is stirred up by the listening, is sort of even more by the dialogue. But it stirs up in the heart to consummate something like that, which is this contemplation we'll be getting to next.

Kirsten Oates: Next time, yeah. Well, Jim, that's probably a good place to end today. There's so much to learn and understand about this letter. So it's been a wonderful opportunity to dig a little deeper today. I've learned a lot from our discussion.

Kirsten Oates: And I think my big takeaway is reimagining my reading, my journaling, my prayer in this relational context, like grounded in the trust of my relationship in God, and how to approach each element of this as an opportunity to deepen, and connect, build that relationship.

Jim Finley: That's it really. Another image that comes to mind is, sometimes we can have a long term, very deep relationship with somebody, you're very close. And you have to be away from each other for a long time. And almost as soon as you get together, you almost pick up where you left off, that there's something in the oneness with each other that's not dependent upon the physical proximity.

Jim Finley: And that's what we're looking for, that interior, Gabriel Marcel says, his mother died when he was young, and he talks about the deep influence he had on his life. And he said it's amazing how present a dead person can be.

Jim Finley: And so what we're looking for, is that kind of felt continuity with the unseen. Like as a living, in vibrancy of interiority in our life. And Guigo helps give it that personal poignancy, whatever word you want to use for it. Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: And you and Guigo, are helping kind of give us the context that this is possible. The assurance that this is possible, through your own deep commitment to this kind of a practice.

Jim Finley: Exactly. Not only is it possible, it's what God had in mind in creating you in the first place. God said, "Why do you exist? Guess why?" In other words, I created you to have someone to give myself to. And someone who had the freedom to in turn, give yourself to me in this consummation of this love destinies fulfill. This is the reason we exist. And then it spills over into the sensitivities with everyone we know, and to life. You know what i mean? It's kind of permeates everything. And we live in a society that kind of lets us down in a way big time when it comes to this. And so we're trying to find our way back home again.

Kirsten Oates: Well, thank you for helping us with that, Jim.

Jim Finley: True.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for today.

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