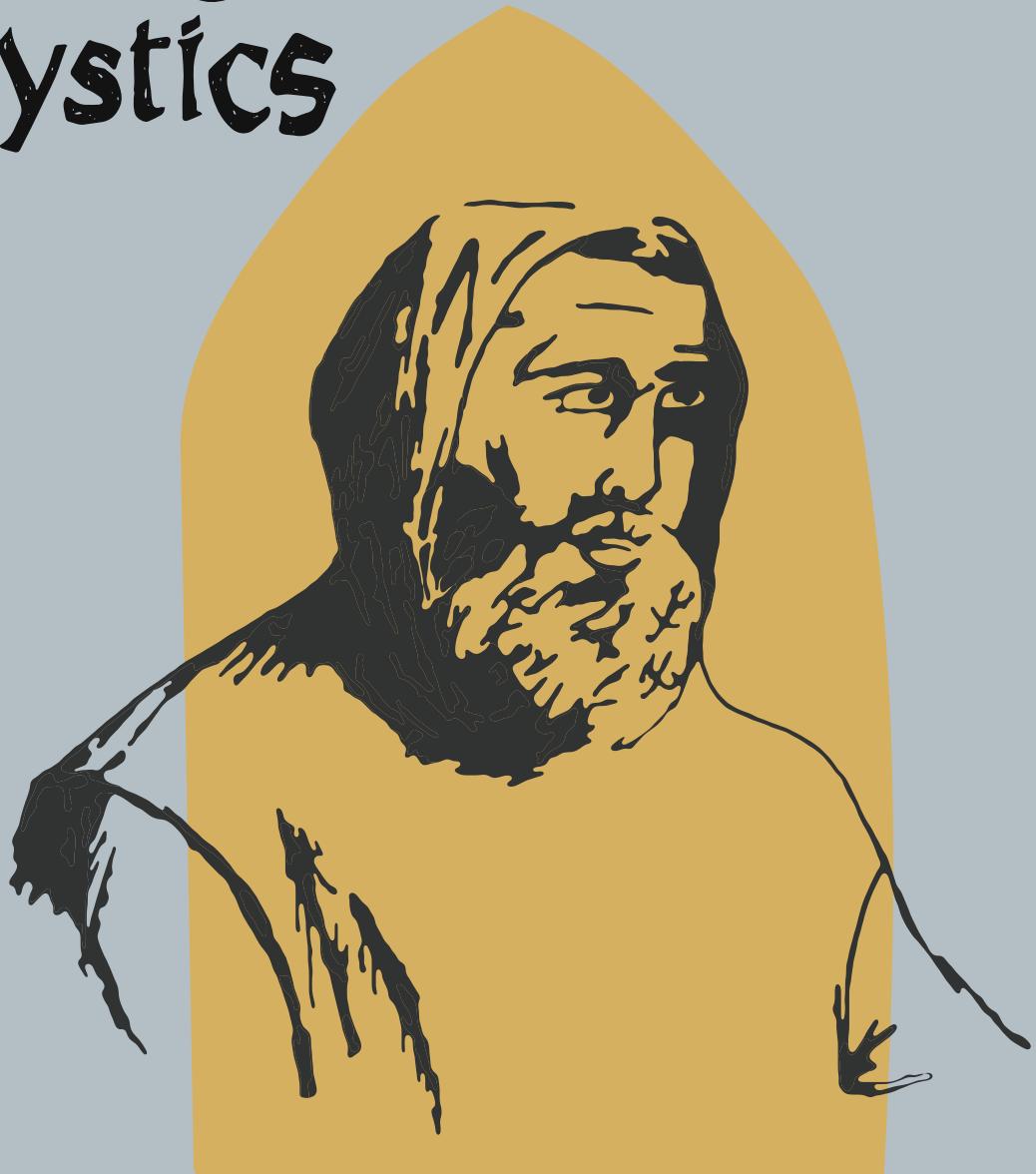


Turning to the Mystics



Guigo 11

Session 3
with James Finley

Jim Finley: Greetings I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning To The Mystics.

Jim Finley: Greetings everyone, and welcome to our time here together. Turning for guidance to the wisdom found in Guigo II's classic work, A Ladder Of Monks. In the previous sessions, the focus was on the fourth rung of the ladder to heaven, contemplation. And we saw how by contemplation Guigo means that point in the path that all the mystics are concerned about, at which the ascending up to the rungs of the ladder of Lectio meditation and deep longings of prayer become mystical. That is, contemplation is here infused contemplation. It's God accessing us with a taste of God's knowledge of God, and a knowledge of who God eternally knows and calls us to be hidden with Christ and God forever.

Jim Finley: And this taste, the celestial taste, of course is not in the full light of glory that is our eternal destiny in God, because it's very subtle, and innermost, and delicate. And we sense within ourselves, too, that it is trustworthy, vast and true, and ultimately divine. And so the question of Guigo is how to help us discern that this is happening to us, because the onset of the state is sometimes it's accompanied by extraordinary things that go along, like overflow into it. Hearing inner voices or seeing visions, and other things can happen to us as a psychological overflow. But in its essence, its innermost, hidden, subtle and delicate. So how do we calibrate our heart to a fine enough scale to discern the stirrings of this state? And then how do we learn to cooperate with it, to not get in the way of it?

Jim Finley: And as that's where we began to see then the theme of the path. That is, there is the path that leads up to this awakening, but in this mystical awakening, this quickening, there's the path that follows from it, that the awakening itself, the light that shines off from the awakening, illuminates the path along which we learned to be healed from all that hinders us from being habitually stabilized in the luminosity. This incarnate infinity, this divinity of our life, and so on. And we saw that, what we saw last time, starting the path, at the end of our session. Yes, that when it ends, when this grace moment ends, whether it be just a flash like a taste, or it might last a few hours, it could last several days sometimes. It's very hard, this happens to people. But as it passes, we're understandably, as it dissipates, we are so amazed and taken by the fullness of it that as it dissipates, we feel a certain sadness that it's gone, in his word, tears.

Jim Finley: That is, there's this longing to abide in that which was so fleetingly glimpsed. And so he suggests the first step of the path is to learn how to begin to sense that God's presence, that God is present in and as our tearful longings. That is, it isn't just they we're longing to abide in this open oneness, this communal presence. But as it dissipates, as our capacity to experientially abide in it, that it abides in us as the sincerity of our longings to abide. And it's like refining our hearts to such sensibilities as these, we begin to get a feel of the path. The next thing here to talk about the path, this is in the 14th section, page 96.

Jim Finley: And Guido writes, "But let such a man, let such a person, such a one who's so graced by this awakening, beware lest this contemplation in which he was lifted up to the very heavens, beware that he not plunge violently into the depths, and after such great graces turn again to sinful pleasures of the world, and of the delights of the flesh. Since, however, the eye of the human heart has not the power to bear for long the shining of the true light. Let the soul descend gently and in due order to one or other of the three degrees by means of which it made its ascent. Let it rest now in one, now and another, as the circumstances of time and place suggest to its free choice, even though, as it seems to me, the soul is the nearer to God

the farther it climbs from the first degree. Such, alas, is the frailty and the wretchedness of human nature.

Jim Finley: "In this way, then, we see clearly by reason and testimony of the scriptures that the perfection of the blessed life is contained in these four degrees, and that the spiritual person, the spiritual man, ought to occupy himself in them constantly. But is there anyone who holds to this way of life? Tell me who he is, and I will praise him. There are many who desire it, and few who achieve it. Would that we were among the few." And I would say there's few who achieve in it in its fullness, but all of us are recipient to the degrees to which this fullness is growing within us, as evidenced by the fact that we're drawn to the beauty or residences of these teachings of these mystics. I'd like to reflect on this, as I understand this and experience this.

Jim Finley: See, let's say there's a moment of awakening. We saw in each of the mystics in Merton, and John of the Cross, Teresa, and saw these quickenings. And on the quickening path, it's true that we sometimes feel we can plunge, fall out of heaven somehow, like a precipitous falling out of the fullness. And he cautions us from, and by the way, sometimes that happens. I mean, it is experienced that way. And then you have to get your bearings and move on. But he's suggesting another sense of it.

Jim Finley: And I think this comes closer to how this is most often experienced. And it's like this, it isn't that, let's just say this moment of oneness happens, and as it dissipates, how I experience this, how I've experienced this is it's like falling backwards in slow motion. Falling, falling, falling into what? Into the Lectio. Looking at it poetically, we would say we fall back into just sitting there. The scriptures are open on our lap, the tear stained page, our finger is still on the text where Jesus says, "Blessed are the pure of heart, they shall see God." The candle's burning, whatever the room is. And we're just ourself again, in the devotional sincerity of our seeking.

Jim Finley: But to know now that now we know that something's different, really, because now we know that without warning, the sustained devotional sincerity can catch fire, and we can be lifted up unexplainably, and to unexplainable union, which is all we everywhere within us and throughout all things, but hidden. And we can be drawn up into an obscure realization of it. We know that, because it happened to us. Likewise, when we fall, falling, and falling, and falling, we fall back into our meditation, this loving dialogue with God, this discursive Meditatio, by journaling back and forth, back and forth, like reason illumined by faith. But now we know that at any given moment, the meditation can catch fire with realizations of a oneness beyond what words can say, or beyond what thought can comprehend. And we know it's true because it happened to us.

Jim Finley: And likewise in our longings is these deep longings for union, which are now all the deeper because we experienced the oneness that we now long for. And we also know how powerless we are by our own finite recesses to consummate that longing. But now we know that at any given moment, these deep longings for an infinite union with the infinite mystery of God can be granted to us in which our finite longings, our graced longings, these can catch fire with union. We know because it's happened to us. And so how long do we wait? It's not our business how long we wait. Because what we're to notice, it isn't just that we're arriving towards some consummate fullness, but we're to realize that these gradients of realization,

that the infinite fullness of the present, is mysteriously... The presence is mysteriously present in the least realization of the present.

Jim Finley: That is, even in the humble Lectio, even in the humility of receiving this word, which the heart recognizes is beautiful. That the plenitude of God is fully present there, speaking to our heart, awaking us to its beauty. And so, but the fullness of this infinite love is hit from us. It returns again to the simplicity of just simply hearing the beauty of the word in scripture or the teaching. These teachings, or the poet, whatever, the beloved, the child, whatever the word comes, it touches us like this. We know this. And likewise, in our reflections, the fullness rains down into, and is present in, the sincerity of our reflections, and is present in the sincerity of our longings. And therefore a pure heart, then, is a heart that rises and falls along these rungs of the ladder, knowing these habituated patterns as is given to us to do so in our heart. That is the purity of our heart. It gets clearer and clearer the more faithful we are to this mysterious, transformative process.

Jim Finley: Another aspect of the path, I think, that Guigo helps us, this is in the ninth section, and Guigo... This is page 89. This is section nine, how grace is hidden. And in this section, he refers to this text in Genesis, in the Torah, and the Pentateuch, and Genesis, on Jacob. And the two texts, I marked them in my Bible here, let me get it. Right here. There is the text of Jacob's dream, which is Genesis chapter 28, beginning with verse 10. And then there's the vision of the latter, the metaphorical, the poet metaphor on which Guigo bases his texts of Jacob wrestling with the angel. And I'd like to reflect, then, on Guigo's allusions to, how he alludes to these passages.

Jim Finley: First, notice that all these mystics, notice they draw their poetic metaphor from scripture, from a contemplative understanding of scripture, under the auspices of which they find a language to this living word of God, calling us to this transformative union. And so we see Jacob, and Jacob falls asleep. And while Jacob sleeps, he dreams, and it's a dream in which he sees a ladder ascending from earth to heaven, and angels ascending and descending up and down the ladder. And when he awakes from the dream, he says, "This is truly the house of God and the gate of heaven, and I knew it not," he says. And I think what Guigo is inviting us to see is that this ladder, the four rungs of the ladder, the Lectio, the meditation, the prayer and contemplation is this ladder.

Jim Finley: And the angels are the illuminations, the presence-ing, and the gifts, and the flux and the flow of God's mysterious ways of ascending and descending the depths of ourself, and descending, taking us up, God into heaven and down and so on. And so my thought is this, what to me it seems to see, how do we apply this to us? I'll share what it means to me, you can sit with maybe a helpful way for you to say it. Is that in deep meditative states, by that, I mean, giving ourself over to sustained, empty handed, childlike attentiveness, a kind of receptive openness. It's like a waking dream.

Jim Finley: And in that waking dream, we move from our customary realms of consciousness, and the exteriority of the passing details of the day, which are all real in their own right. But we move down into the mysterious flow of the interiority of dreamlike, interior realizations of the hidden resources within and beyond ourself, where God

lives and is drawing us to himself, drawing us to herself. I think it's like that. And I also think, then, that when we're in the day by day consciousness, little by little, that dreamlike, that is, interior sensibility to the undefinable depth-like nature, starts rendering the factual details translucent to the presence of God. That there's a kind of a habituated sensitivity to these ever present depths in the details of the moment, and discerning those and moving with those, and so on.

Jim Finley: And secondly, this wrestling. He wrestles through the night with an angel, other texts, there's different interpretations. He wrestles with God. The angel is the messenger of God. And when dawn breaks, see when dawn breaks, there's this mysterious little exchange between the angel and God, like, "Release me," the angel said, "And tell me your name, give me a blessing." And he doesn't give him his name, and I'm not going go into all this right here, but just with this statement, this one point, that he gives him a new name, that's Israel. And Israel, then, is the faith of Abraham flowing out into the Jewish people, into the chosen people.

Jim Finley: And in that, God revealed to Abraham, in that lineage of the awakening of Abraham, to see in the ongoing... that lives in the ongoing people of God. To see how it also then extends in continuity with Christ, as the Christ is a Jewish mystic, as they revealed to us in the dispensation of the logos of Christ, and flows over and is revealed in Mohammed, the prophet Mohammed, blessed be he, on the night of destiny, in his surrender to the utter transcendence of God. And so we have these lineages, these families, of awakening, and awakening is the richness that flows out into a communal realization. And we move in this interior tribal belonging, open to the belonging of God and whatever it occurs throughout the world, I would say.

Jim Finley: And in this encounter with God, he comes away at daybreak, and the angel wounds Jacob, wounds Israel, in his thigh. Other texts say his hip. One translation, I think it's Jerusalem Bible, your sciatic nerve. If you ever had sciatic nerve pain, it goes right to the core of the body and you're wounded. And I'd like to talk about the wound, and that the master limps, as an understanding of this. But let's say that we look on these mystic teachers as masters. We go to John of the Cross, Teresa, later we look at Eckhart and Julian of Norwich, look on them as masters. But if we lived with them, got to know them personally, and I say this in living with Thomas Merton, and knowing him personally in our one-on-one talks, you would see that the awakened master limps. That is, he or she, they have their own foibles. They have their own proclivities of their personality. They have their own edges that they're working on, and they're a human being.

Jim Finley: See, but here's the thing about it. See, the master limps, that is, the one so awakened limps, in his or her ongoing frailties. But the master's not handicapped in the limping. That's the thing. Because the master knows that they're just his or her own unique edition of the foibles and frailties of the human experience. Why be handicapped by it? And so why are we handicapped by our foibles? Our missteps? And we slide back. They say in AA, "Slow progress marked by heavy setbacks." Why do we get so disheartened by these unresolved matters? It's because we believe that our shortcomings have the authority to name who we are. They become shame based reference points, see, that I'm trying to get past. See, am I holy yet? Am I holy yet?

Am I holy yet? Like that, see? And it's enough to make God sit on a stone somewhere and weep.

Jim Finley: So we attribute authority to our weakness, rather than attributing authority to God being infinitely in love with us as unexplainably precious in our weakness. And to see the weakness, and to accept it, and to accept it as being permeated through and through with mercy, is experiential salvation. See? And so that's the first thing, I think, is maybe we limp with such freedom. This doesn't mean there isn't the moral imperative to work on the issues that continue to hurt and compromise ourselves and others. We do need to do that. We do need to work where we're still withholding, or still aggressive, or we're still inappropriately assertive. And you what the pattern is, what it's like. But the point is, we're consistently working on those things in a piece that's not dependent on the ability to overcome them, but rather to experience God sustaining us and guiding us in our ongoing effort.

Jim Finley: And over time we do see progress, I would think. It's a mixed bag, but we do kind of see, there's a maturation process in incarnating these low potentials and sharing them with other people. And there's another sense in which the master limps. And the master limps in the sense in which... By the way, the master who's teaching us is inviting us to see how these same things are true of us, which is the path. The handing on of the lineage is what we see in the teachers, in these masters, these mystic teachers, inviting us to see that the same thing is completely true of us. And we're being invited along the path where we become ever more intimately awakened to that, and grateful for that, and following that. That's the intimacy of it.

Jim Finley: And so we, we limp in this sense. I think I want to give another sense. In which, in the awakenings, the flash points of oneness, however they may occur, in nature, or love, or sorrow, or aesthetic beauty, but however, solitude. However it occurs, the quickening, the oneness, we limp in that, by our own powers, we limp in our powerlessness to be habitually stabilized in it. That is, we long for it and the depths of it all the more, because it has access to us, and it has left us apparently to keep seeking it. Just knowing it's there, but we can't find a way into the inner circle to unexplainably rest in it habitually, as our heart would long to do. And in that sense we're wounded, but it's a love wound. It's the kind of a gift actually, because we're also to see, then, how God is mysteriously present in the unconsummated longings.

Jim Finley: There was the unconsummated longings before the awakening, Lectio Divina, meditation, and prayer, which heightened, heightened, heightened to this contemplation. Then once the taste of contemplation is given, we descend down into our Lectio, our meditation, and our prayer. There's a kind of a mystical longing, an unconsummated consummation of something vast and sweet and true, that is carrying us, and leading us towards itself, in our inability to be consummated in it on our terms. The next insight of the path to me, this is on section 11, pages 91 and 92. You see texts like this in the mystics. We find them somewhat troublesome, like how do we... What do we do with passages like this?

Jim Finley: "How much the soul must be on its guard after it has been visited by grace. But take care, bride of the spouse. When he goes away, the beloved, he does not go far. And even if you cannot see him, you are always in his sight. He is full of eyes in front and behind." See the reference to the... "You cannot hide from him anywhere, for he surrounds you with those

essential messengers of his, with his messengers of his spirit, who serve to bring back shrewd reports to watch how you behave when he is not there to accuse you to him.

Jim Finley: "If they detect in you any marks of wantonness and vileness, this is a jealous spouse. He will not leave you... He will leave you at once and give you his favors to others if you play him false with anyone, trying to please anyone more than him. This spouse is fastidious. He is of gentle birth. He is rich. He is fairer than all the sons of men, and so he will not deign to take a bride who is not fair. If he sees in you any blemish, any wrinkle, he will at once turn away from you. He cannot bear uncleanness of any kind. So be chaste, be modest and meek, if you wish to enjoy your spouse's company."

Jim Finley: I'd like to reflect on this. What do we do with this, really? And so God's secretly watching you and the angels are watching you, and each time you slip back into your halfhearted ways, your unresolved ways of hurting yourself and others, the messengers quickly run and let God know what you did. And God will say, "I don't know if I want to stay one with this person, I'll move elsewhere and give myself to somebody else." That's what it sounds like. But here's what I think we need to really understand. I think there's certain cultural things here we need to take into account, and not to go into all that right now.

Jim Finley: But I think surely we need to see this in the light of the gospel, and in the light of the mercy of God. And here's a way that helps me to see it, in human love first, basically, is that when we deeply, deeply love somebody, who we're so graced in knowing that they deeply love us, the spouse, the lover, the friend, the child, the mother, the father, the grandmother, the godfather, the friend, whatever. Just that gift of the mutual gift of meeting each other, and one with each other in love, that in the depths of our love, we're especially careful not to intentionally do anything to cause suffering to the beloved, is the thing.

Jim Finley: And when we do slip and we do, we're very quick to go to the beloved and make amends, to talk, to say, "I'm sorry." And also, if it's something... You can't quit doing it, you can't stop withholding intimate... You can't stop it. Sometimes you lose your... You can't admit that you're not there yet, but you're working on it. You're sincere about it. You're taking steps to take care of it, and you'll keep reporting to the person and so on. And I think there's another piece of this too, is that in the eyes of the beloved, you're also careful not to engage in activities and rituals that are hurtful to you. They're often internalized traumas and abandonments. Why? Because it hurts the beloved to see how you hurt yourself. It hurts the beloved to see you deprive from yourself the beauty of yourself that they see in you. And you return the favor.

Jim Finley: So I think there's a certain sacramental quality to deep human intimacy, and deep human... It sacramentalizes and embodies this depth dimension of how God relates to us, and we relate to God, weaving us into the mystery of himself and our brokenness. In Christian terms, this is the mystery of the cross really, this is experiential salvation. This day you'll be with me in paradise. You can't make me stop being infinitely in love with you, and the perpetual call to be open and move with that. And in this prayer, then, we're experiencing the lofty depths of that, that it might spill over into our attitudes and ways of treating ourselves and other people throughout the day.

Jim Finley: And lastly, I'll end on this note. In listening to reading these words of these mystics, and

this is page 89, and he's writing to this letter of spiritual guidance to his friend. And then suddenly he says this: "But why do we give this public utterance, though it should be said in secret? Why do we try to express in everyday language affections that no language can describe? Those who have not known such things do not understand them, for they could learn more clearly of them only from the book of experience where God's grace itself is the teacher. Otherwise, it is of no use for the reader to search in earthly books. There is little sweetness in the study of the literal sense, unless there be a commentary which is found in the heart, to reveal in us the inward sense."

Jim Finley: I'd like to end with a few words about words. What are you saying? Let's say that we know there are words that we share with one another, in which we share our understanding of and response to facts, to details. We share our conclusions, and we share our opinions. All of that. And it's important, in terms of the human enterprise, and the day by day, and different realms of the social order. That's all very real and important. But then there's more interior words that cannot be heard. They can be spoken, but not understood by the one who has not been experientially initiated into the interiority of it.

Jim Finley: Let's take in two people meeting each other, and one person begins to realize they're falling in love with the person, and this person who realizes they're falling in love with the person, they send a signal flag up the pole. They disclose something, they allude to it. And what they're hoping for is to see in the person who's heard it that they light up inside because they've heard it. You're met like that. You can also painfully tell when you share it and it goes right past the person. It's especially painful in a relationship where you repeatedly kept trying to share it, and it repeatedly goes past the person like that. It's complicated, different reasons. And so he is saying, why say these words?

Jim Finley: And so who do we talk to about this? We know there are certain people we live with that are simply... We don't talk about this, both for our sake and theirs. We talk about the factual. We also talk about the levels of love in something that is present. There's issues of family and friend. There's all of that. It's important. It's real. It matters. With this innermost language, to whom do we go? And I think this is, then, what makes these teachings mean so much to us, that here's somebody... I used to think about this when I was in the monastery, that when I read Merton through high school, *The Sign Of Jonas*, and when I was at the monastery, listening to him, direction, he talked to the novices. And then I would go out into the woods with Guigo or John of the Cross or something, sit out in the woods, at the base of a tree or something. And I was so grateful for the people who say such things.

Jim Finley: I was once at a cloistered monastery of nuns, I was asked to give a talk to the community there. I think it was Carmelite. It might've been Poor Clares, I can't remember. And I had mentioned to them, I talked to them about Daniel Walsh, who taught me metaphysics, medieval philosophy at the monastery. They had a very profound effect on me. And one of the extern sisters, who was not in the cloister behind the grill, but she was out talking to visitors. And she said, "Well Dan Walsh, he came to me, he came here and he spoke to us." And I said, "Oh, really?" I said, "What'd you think?" She said, "I didn't care for it," she said, "I couldn't understand a word he said. But I was so glad I was in the room when he said it, because it changed my life." And I think, therefore, these teachers are people who have been awakened.

Jim Finley: And then they're also among the awakened who feel called as a ministry to share teachings, to help and offer guidance to those who are being interiorly awakened, by the very fact that we're interiorly quickened by it, or we're drawn by it, that we're drawn to it. And we're so grateful that they spoke to us this way. This is how it's handed on, really. And to know also it can template the spiritual direction to sit with these people, if you're fortunate to have a contemplative director, or you direct people. You know what that's like, when sometimes you're sitting in the presence of someone who's more present to you than you are. And they hear you stumbling, trying to articulate something, and you're not able, in reflective consciousness, to sense the far reaching implications of what you're struggling to say. But they do, and they listen to it, and they meet you there. And this kind of sensibility, or sensitivity, I think, is at the heart of contemplative exchanges.

Jim Finley: And then we know that these exchanges between ourself are incarnate manifestations of the intimate exchanges between God and ourself. Within ourself, these words of oneness this living word. And so I think it's in this spirit, then, that we see that blessed are the pure of heart that they shall see God. See, blessed are the pure of heart for they shall hear God speaking to them in the depths of themself in prayer, and hear God speaking to them in every word of scripture. And every word Jesus says, and all the sages and down through the ages, and mystics, and poets, and people from which you sense the cadences or the richness of this interior language of the heart, that carries us forward through the day like this.

Jim Finley: And we know then that we can sense it's incarnating itself in us, the simple sincerity of our exchanges with each other. It doesn't... You know what I mean? It's just we... to it, it isn't dependent on the ability of the other person to realize it or to us to realize it. But we sense the resonance of it, and the beauty of it, and that's the gift, and such are these words. And so then with this, then let's end with a sitting. See, be still and know I am God. Be still and know, that is, be still in this silence, that in this silence we can interiorly hear God in silence, speaking to our heart. It has quickened us in this way, and has drawn us with these longings to follow this path. What a gift, really, for all of us. So I encourage you then to sit straight, and hold your hands, and bow. Be still and know I am God. Be still and know I am. Be still and know. Be still. Be.

Jim Finley: (silence)

Jim Finley: We'll slowly say the Lord's prayer together. Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory known forever. Amen. Mary, mother of contemplatives, pray for us. Guigo the second, pray for us. And after Kirsten, I think there's going to be two question periods with her. One will include your questions, we'll dialogue about things, and then there'll be a break here. And then next, I think toward the beginning of next year, we're going to move over to the English mystics, and we'll do The Cloud of Unknowing, which will lead us into centering prayer, and then Julian of Norwich. And so we'll add here, along with Mary and Guigo, we'll add here the author of The Cloud of Unknowing, pray for us, and Julian of Norwich, pray for us.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning To The Mystics, a podcast created by

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