

Turning to the Mystics



Dialogue: The First Mansion

Jim Finley: [music] Greetings. I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to the Mystics. [bell]

Kirsten Oates: Welcome, everyone, to Turning to the Mystics. In this season we are turning to St. Teresa of Ávila, and Jim is leading us in Lectio using her book the Interior Castle. As Jim and I reflected on this season, we thought it would be helpful to include some more question-and-response sessions to support the Lectio practice. Currently, we are two Mansions in, and we thought this would be a good time to reflect on some key themes and teachings.

Welcome, Jim.

Jim Finley: Very good. Yes. I'd like to add to that by saying that these reflections that I'm sharing with you in these series of podcasts, I've been giving these talks on silent weekend contemplative retreats for the past thirty years. These are silent retreats. At the end of each conference, it would be on Teresa or Eckhart or somebody, and there are questions; people ask questions. They're deeply personal questions. But over the years, certain fundamental questions get asked over and over again because these mystical teachings raise questions relative to our customary ways of understanding things and how do I relate to this? How do I relate to that? How can I benefit from this?

So, that's the purpose of this session here is to hopefully tap into some of these very broad-based questions to make these teachings more accessible or more helpful to use as the logic of this time here together with Kirsten. Hopefully, you'll find it helpful.

Kirsten Oates: Thanks, Jim. I'll kick us off with our first question. What you've said is unique about the Interior Castle is that it lays out a path for us, a path of growth, of transformation, starting at the beginning, and a lot of mystics don't start right at the beginning, but I wondered if you would just describe what is the path, a path to what, a path of what? How would you describe it?

Jim Finley: I put it this way. Let's say that what she's doing, and every mystic does this, they start out with a poetic metaphor that bears witness to what faith proclaims as an understanding of reality as revealed through our faith. For her, she starts out with a poetic understanding of the revelation that we're created by God in the image and likeness of God, an ongoing, perpetual, God-given godly identity. When she uses the word soul, she's referring to that identity. Our identity is the stature of the spiritual foundations of our deepest identity given to us by God as a person. That's the soul.

And then she says I'm going to take you then on a guided tour through your own soul knowing that God, who is the creator of the soul, knows all about you, the universe cannot contain, is actually within you in the innermost center of your soul.

And so, I'm going to be guiding you through your own soul into that intimate center where God's waiting for you there to grant you this union. She says, then you might ask me, well, how can you guide me through my own soul since I am my soul? She says this is where the idea of mansions comes in, or dwelling places. She says, understand that there are different

ways of understanding what it means to be in a place.

Right now, you and I, Kirsten, each of us is in the place we're in as we talk, and right now everyone listening to it is in the place that they're listening to this. But the extent to which each of us is interiorly aware of the subject matter in a heartfelt way would vary greatly from person to person. The Mansions, then, refer to the degrees to which or the extent to which we're aware of and one with God creating us, God creating in our soul in God's image and likeness, dwelling in our soul and calling us into ever deeper union with himself, within ourself, within our soul.

And so, we're going to start out at the very beginning with the very first awkward, first glimmers of spiritual consciousness. The beginnings of religious conversion where for the first time God becomes real to you, or God's relationship with you becomes intimately significant to you. She starts there, see? How do we understand the status of the beginner? They say people in the First Mansion, they do pray, but they don't pray well, and they don't pray often. But it's a gift to be there because there are some people that she says don't even know they have a soul, they're so externalized. So, that's the gist of it. She starts right at the very beginning helping us understand the gift and the challenges of being a spiritual beginner as we first find our way into our own soul.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So, in beginner language I might say that the path is a path of growing awareness of God within me?

Jim Finley: Let me put it personally like as a prayer, because she puts this in terms of prayer. I want to say it like a prayer: Lord God, I'm so grateful for this new sense of this desire to be closer to you. I've heard about you all my life, and my faith, I listen to it, but I don't think I've ever heard that before in a personal way that I would actually like you to help me to experience your oneness with me in my life. But I find it confusing. Seriously, I don't know exactly how to proceed here. I'm a man. There are all kinds of distractions. There are a lot of things tugging at me in my daily life. I'm in the middle of a lot of challenging things. I need some help here in getting my bearings and how to realistically get my balance in a way where I'm aligned up with this capacity to let you help me stabilize in your presence in my life. See, that would be the prayer of the First Mansion.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. Thank you. Just starting in that First Mansion, Teresa talks about the fact that we have a soul and that without knowing our soul, we do not know ourselves. She says that we're exiled from our soul. God is present there, but we cannot experience God. And so, I'm just wondering, I know when I've attended church, there hasn't been a lot of great teaching on having a soul and what that actually means. Then in the culture I think this idea of a soul has been romanticized, a soul mate, a soul meaning, just an inner goodness, or something.

Jim Finley: Soul—if a person is very soulful.

Kirsten Oates: Soulful, yeah. Why is it that we don't know we have a soul?

Jim Finley: Here's what I think. This has to do with modernity and it has to do with secularization of consciousness. I think when we tend to think of ourselves, when I say "myself," I tend to think of my cultural setting. I understand that psychologically. So, my understanding is how do I experience myself as a man being the age that I am, the conditions that I'm in, the

circumstances that I'm in, what's my sense of my physical health or lack thereof, my emotional, inner peace or lack thereof, my intimacy needs or lack thereof? I'm on a meaningful career path, that it meets my expectations or more or lack thereof. I call this "myself." So, if I would ask you how's it going, you would tell me about that. See, you'd let me know, and I'd listen, and we'd share stories: "Let me tell you about myself."

The soul has to do more with what is the interiority of ourselves that gives meaning to all of that. That is, if I'm nothing more than the sum total of conditioned states of constantly fluctuating circumstances that carry me through time until I die, is that it? Is that it? But doesn't my faith tell me I am that but I'm not just that. I'm also a spiritual being created by God in the image and likeness of God with an infinite destiny. The God who gives me that destiny is inside of me sustaining me.

And so, this is experiential self-knowledge. See, how can I go past and transcend psychological modes of self in spiritual dimensions of myself? I think that's why where she says some people don't even know they have a soul, they're so externalized in the way centrifugal force of events spins them out into their circumstances where they're just trying to get through another day or their attainments, and their losses, and their gains, and so on, they're tempted to think they're nothing but that. And insofar as I'm nothing but that, that's the sense I don't know I have a soul. But then I fall in love, or I have a child, or I lose love, or I nearly die, or I'm out alone in the middle of a thunderstorm, or at home, and all of a sudden, the richness of interiority of myself dawns on me. Having tasted it, I know it's there and I sense that's what's missing. I understand it along those lines.

Kirsten Oates: That's so helpful. Teresa says that our intellects cannot grasp the soul. In another section she says that these inner teachings are so obscure to the mind. Again, when I reflect on attending church, I feel like a lot of the sermons are really targeted at the mind—

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: --and developing the intellectual understanding of theology or the stories in Scripture.

Jim Finley: I would say this-- I would say first about sermons or homilies, ideally speaking. I think that what they, at least hopefully, are really based on is Scripture. Since they're based on Scripture, they're based on the word of God, and the word of God is about this. The word of God is about this, see? "Lord, Master, what is the greatest commandment? To love the lord your God with your whole"-- everything is about it. The homily ideally draws the truth of Scripture, which is about this, but it tends to apply it to the pastoral concrete realities of our situation, our struggles, our attainments, an aspiring person that we met. Let's get renewed again and go home with more of a sense of it. What we don't tend to hear is a word bearing witness to how intimate that is, like an intimate, hidden resonance of something.

And that from time to time, we get echoes of, and the homily rarely—and this makes this Lectio, this is Teresa then, see? The homilist rarely says let's look at that. Let's

look at that. What is it that I obscurely sense matters very, very much in the presence of this situation? But I don't know what to make of it in the sense in which all my attempts to conceptually define it fall short of what it is. Paradigmatic consciousness, it's not my conclusions about myself in reflective, empirical consciousness. It's really the intimate immediacy of the undefined and undefinable, obscurely sensed. But I'm not reducible to the sum total of all my definitions about myself nor anyone else's definitions about me. How do I get to that? That's what I think she means by, "We can't grasp our own soul."

Kirsten Oates: Do you have advice for us in terms of how we handle our intellects or our minds that try to grasp and understand when we're on this path?

Jim Finley: Yeah, I do. My sense is this: Certainly, our intellect, the way we usually think of our intellect, conceptual mind, science, and thoughts and ideas, that's important. It's holy. It's created by God. We need it to function and get through our day. How do I conceptually understand the aspects of my life in a realistic and helpful way? All that's important. All that's important. That's where reflection and reading, or if I'm having difficulties, I can work those through. All that's important.

But one way to get at it would be, I'll use an example of it. I'll use the example of married love. In this example I think we used it before in the Merton section, is that notice that when we don't know someone very well how easy it is to express our opinions about that person. We could say that's what we know about them—let me tell you about so and so—my boss, or my pastor, or a politician, anybody.

But when we've loved someone very, very deeply for a long, long time, and someone would ask us who do you know the beloved to be, we don't know what to say. We also know that anything we would say wouldn't be what we know because it's not reducible to words and our heart breaks when we try, which is the sincerity of the self-disclosure to the beloved. That's it, see?

So, to paraphrase Meister Eckhart when we get to Meister Eckhart is to find that act, to find that person, to find that event, which when you give yourself over to it with your whole heart, it unravels your petty preoccupation with your self-absorbed self. It strangely brings you home to yourself—the long, slow walk to no place in particular, the quiet hour at day's end, sitting with a poet, or prayer, or helping people. These are intimations or contact points with an obscure, intimate knowing that qualitatively goes beyond conclusions and definitions. I would put it that way, it's a personal thing.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And I find as I read someone like Teresa, she had that experience, and I can feel the resonance of it, and it feels like a sense of beauty, a sense of joy, a sense of wonder. I can feel that in her words and is that a way we might experience it?

Jim Finley: Yes. By the way, this is real important in how the lineage has handed on, this mystical lineage. Shunryū Suzuki, the contemporary Sōtō Zen master, he says in these traditions, he's speaking of Zen, mystical Catholicism, the Kabbalah, these traditions, deep yoga, all these traditions. He said, "The primary task of the teacher is to give

witness to the seeker that what the seeker seeks is real.” That is, you know your heart has not deceived you. That you intuit you’re sitting in the presence of someone with whom it’s been realized. It’s what Richard Rohr means by, in Hinduism, the ashram is empty when the realized yogi dies, and it waits for the next realized yogi.

In other words, when we read Teresa, I think it’s very clear she’s not saying this on hearsay. This isn’t opinion. You get the feeling that she is what she says. And so, the clarity or the intimate sincerity with which she’s trying to help us, we know that she’s trying to help us experience what she knows is true because she’s experienced it, and she lives by it. She’s trying to help us experience and live by it, and that’s the teacher.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, that’s really helpful.

Jim Finley: It’s like evidence.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. It’s a certain kind of evidence of the presence incarnated in the person who’s been metamorphosed in it, beyond the intellect and beyond the mind, yeah. I think that’s the next phase that you’re describing.

Jim Finley: That’s right. That’s why I think contemplative spiritual direction where, say, you’re sitting with someone who’s ripened, or well-seasoned in this, contemplative spiritual direction then is two people sitting together sharing what neither one can explain. But they’re called to shed light on the unexplainable that’s transforming us into itself, see? But it takes one to know one. So, you look for somebody who’s more well-seasoned in this because you realize it’s obscure, and you’re subject to self-deception. If we’re fortunate enough to find such a living person, that’s a gift. But the deathless beauty of the mystic lives timelessly, as she wrote so soulfully, that she is somehow intimately present in everything she says, and so we can meet her helping us.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I think you’ve shared it in this podcast, but I know you’ve shared with me that Thomas Merton, who we turned to in season one, was very much impacted by Teresa and carries forward her lineage in his contemplative writing and teaching.

Jim Finley: Yes. The Rule of St. Benedict that we follow at the monastery was written in the 5th century. Benedict, in the Western Church in Italy, when he wrote the Rule, was inspired by the Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers in Egypt. He was inspired by these hermits, these spiritually awakened beings. And then down through history, there’s a lineage of awakened hearts of mystics and saints down through the ages. There was a form of Bernard of Clairvaux in the 11th century, the primacy of love. Merton wasn’t just well-steeped in these lineages, he lived in this cloistered silence of a monastery that radicalized a commitment to live by it. He’s one of these people, I think, who crossed over into God. That is, he’s one of these people, I think. Thomas Merton says in *The Asian Journal*, he said, “Once in a while someone crosses over into God and breaks through into God.”

Someone recognizes that person’s breakthrough and they sit with that person, and there’s formed there in that place a community that no one can ever destroy. That’s the contemplative church. It’s a deathless community of being in the presence of someone in whose presence you’re not alone. The person is trying to help you understand what’s happening to you. Now it’s your turn, say, this is your turn now to yield to this. Merton

bears witness that it's always contemporary, it's timeless and ageless. It's always trans-temporal, trans- historical expression in history of the infinite, of the deathless nature of love.

Kirsten Oates: Thanks, Jim. I'm going to read a quote from the First Mansion, chapter 2, where Teresa says, "Always visualize your soul as vast, spacious, and plentiful. This amplitude is impossible to exaggerate. The soul's capacity far transcends our imagining. The sun at the center of this place radiates to every part." I wondered, Jim, when I read that, I wondered, is it helpful for us as we journey with Teresa to imagine the soul in these ways she describes it like as a crystal, in this way, she describes it here "vast, spacious, plentiful. The sun at the center of this place radiates to every part." Is that a practice that would be helpful to us?

Let's say this, this is one way I think where I think it is helpful. Let's say, and she says it in that same chapter, I think. She says, if we think of heaven as the word we use where God lives, "Our Father who art in heaven," if heaven is where God lives, and if God is living inside of your soul, your soul is God's heaven. So, your soul is heaven in miniature.

Kirsten Oates: That's lovely.

Jim Finley: But furthermore, although the soul is a soul in miniature in which it's imaginable, we can imagine even though it pales compared to the boundaryless expanse of the celestial realm which is God, this earthly embodiment of God's heaven, which is my own soul, is vast beyond what I can compare. It's certainly infinitely bigger than my ego. In the layered interiority and poverty of my ego, I'm a riddle to myself. See, I can't exhaust in a clear, objective manner, the layered richness and realities of ego consciousness, of reflection, of memory, of the will, of sensation of the body. Even that, it's just endlessly-- That's why the psychology and medicine will never exhaust itself because the ego itself is in some way inexhaustible in these measures.

So, this then is qualitatively richer than that. In some sense then, she gets into all this in the Fourth Mansion, it isn't the soul that's God's heaven in miniature, the soul is God's heaven in all truth. There's a certain point where there's no distinction between heaven; and so, your soul is as boundaryless as the boundaryless presence of God of which we call heaven.

And so, it's very helpful then to see it as poetry because poetry is evocative, and it helps break open conceptual structures. It's like being in love with someone, or something you love very much, just when you thought you had a pretty definitive hold on it, you lean in a little deeper, and here it's much more than you imagined. And then you get used to that, and you're going around that it's more than it's imagined. Then you begin to sense there's no end it, see? There's no end to the mystery you're leaning into, and that's how I think this kind of imagery is very helpful. It gives us a way to talk about what's so hard to talk about because we're honoring the dynamic expansiveness of it and realizing that we're talking about the ultimacy of who we are. See, that's what makes it that we're the subject matter of the inquiry.

Kirsten Oates: [laughter] It's very personal.

Jim Finley: No, really. It's a transpersonal personal. See, the deepest question is not why is there something rather than nothing? Why is there someone rather than no one? And I'm that someone. Can I join God in knowing who God knows and calls me to be? This is Teresa.

Kirsten Oates: That was a really helpful explanation, and I think then what I'm realizing is that quote worked for me in the way you described. It felt expansive beyond my own sense of something and for people listening there might be a different quote, but that we might be looking for in Teresa's words those places where we get drawn to something deeper, to something more expansive, and sit with those pieces.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Let me share something that's coming to me now because she's going to be talking later how this touches our life this way. You know, Dan Berrigan in the 60's was on the FBI Most Wanted list because he was pouring blood on draft cards. They put him in prison. He was against nuclear war. He was against the Vietnam War. He came to visit Merton, and Merton is one of these people that's also involved in the Transformation Center. An interesting thing about Dan Berrigan is that every Sunday he would go to a cancer hospital and mop the floors of the cancer hospital.

He did that every Sunday. And he was a poet. And you say, "Well, why would Dan Berrigan mop the floors of a cancer hospital?" And that's a glimpse into the expansive nature of your soul. You know what I mean? Just certain people are called to do certain things with a certain imperative, or they're obeying something, or they're honoring something, you know, obediential fidelity to something. And so, we see mirrored in them a grandeur, see? And so, "What's this asking out of me? What's love asking out of me?" And that's the soulful. And so, Teresa is saying let's look very closely at this, you know, the intimacy of it all.

Kirsten Oates: So, we might know what it's asking out of us individually? Yeah.

Jim Finley: Yeah. I'm in a situation, you're in a situation. So, when Thomas Merton says, "Life is ninety-nine percent Mickey Mouse. It won't help to relocate because Mickey Mouse will be waiting for you at the airport to show to your new apartment." He says, "The key to life is finding the kernel of pure truth in every situation." So, I'm in a situation. Life's complicated. It's hard being a human being, but what is the kernel of pure truth, see, that's hidden right in the middle of my situation, and how can I through silence, or humility, or prayer, see, the pearl of great price, how can I find that? And Teresa is about that, I think. At least that's one way of saying it. [music]

Kirsten Oates: Turning to the Mystics will continue in a moment.

Yvette Trujillo: Love, humility, compassion. Expand your awareness of St. Francis's teachings including the Alternative Orthodoxy in Richard Rohr's *The Franciscan Way*. Join hundreds of participants all over the world as you explore a deeper connection to the Gospels' message of humility and love. Registration for this interactive online course ends July 29. Visit cac.org/franciscan. That's cac.org/franciscan to learn more.

Kirsten Oates: She talks about prayer being the language of the soul and she gives guidance around what that kind of prayer looks like. So, in one place, she talks about needing to be very aware of who we're talking to when we pray. She says we're not praying to a servant but the Beloved. In another place, she talks about it being important to acknowledge our gratitude for God and solicit God's mercy. I wonder if you have any advice for us as we pray the language of the soul.

Jim Finley: Yes. To echo what we said when we looked at this First Mansion, I want to echo. She just

says these beautiful one-liners. Really, you just sit with a pragmatic depth to her in one sentence, she has that gift of articulating these things. She says, let's say we go to prayer, we're following Teresa. She's our guide. In the Lectio we open the Scriptures, we open to read, God talks to us. God is revealed to us in the beauty or truth of these words like this. Then God says, who's saying these words to us while we sit there in prayer reading the Scriptures, God says to us, "Now it's your turn. What do you think? Where are you at with this? I want to know, seriously." So, she says when you begin to talk to God, she says you should realize who you're talking to. You're talking to the person who is perpetually creating the whole universe.

You're talking to the one who's giving you your next breath. Who's giving you your next heartbeat, the one who knows you through and through and through and through and through and through and through for love's sake alone. God waiting to hear you talk to God you should be aware—and know she says and she has this imagery I think it's in *The Life* I think where she says—what you do is you lean in real close and imagine you're whispering in God's ear, and you can feel God's hand on your shoulder and God's infinitely interested in everything you say because "I created the whole universe for you because I'm in love with you. I created you to have someone to give myself to," like this. That's who you're talking to, the Infinite Beloved who's letting you know that you're God's beloved. Merton says, "With God a little sincerity goes a long way."

It's an unguarded, vulnerability of that piety, that devotional sincerity where we lean deeply, "He walks with me, and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own. The love we share as we tarry there no other has ever known," and we walk by that. It's like people who love each other very much. They're not playing games. They're not composing clever things to say. There's a mutual vulnerability of utter sincerity that itself conveys the words of love they're longing to hear, and it's a sacrament or echo of what God's waiting to hear from us because it echoes in everything God says. I think it's like that. It's a lovely way to look at it.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, it certainly is when you're describing who God is when she said know who you're talking to when you gave that description, it almost silences you. You don't know what to say but then how to learn to speak into that.

Jim Finley: Exactly. Another image I'm coming to, we've mentioned this in the Merton reflections, I think, when I was with Thomas Merton in direction, I worked at the pig barn. I would always go in he would always start by asking me, "How's it going?" I told him, I said, "Well, we're painting the pig barn." He said, "What color?" I said, "Blue." Then he said, "In honor of our Blessed Mother?" Because blue was the honor tradition for Mary. I laughed, and I said, "No, it's the only color they had." They gave me a five-gallon can of paint and a lot of brushes to go out and paint the damn pig barn. He cut my laughter. He said, "You know what your problem is? You're suspicious." That a monk would actually want to paint the pig barn blue in honor of our Blessed Mother is the ancient way. But it's not naïve, it's concretized in radical commitment in truth. So, what are we willing to become disarmingly vulnerable about? We pray out of that. That's the word.

Kirsten Oates: Wow. That's really helpful. So, building on that discussion about prayer, Jim, Teresa talks about the three hinges of the door that take us from one Mansion to another, and she describes prayer, humility, and self-knowledge. We just talked about prayer. How about

humility? What does she mean when she talks about the need for humility?

Jim Finley: So, prayer, then, is the intimacy of the sincerity of the engagement. It's that actual act of the rendezvous itself is the prayer. Let's call it that's the prayer. The humility, and I'll say it as a prayer, I'll put words to it. The prayer is even as I begin to approach you, I want to acknowledge I don't know how to approach you. Even though you're telling me here that you're already one with me, I want to acknowledge I have mixed feelings about it. In a way, I believe you, but I don't. As a matter of fact, I'm not even sure I know what it means to say something like that. Not only that, I'm having a hard time stabilizing in this obscure self-acknowledgement, knowing it's the place at which the union I'm looking for occurs.

And so, I'm never humiliated by you, but I'm endlessly humbled by you because you give yourself to me in my inability to comprehend. Because there's my ego again trying to figure out how to comprehend it under the condition under which we are seeing, but what if I'm proceeding into the incomprehensible? This incomprehensibly giving itself to me in my acknowledgement that I don't comprehend it. Does that make sense in a way?

Kirsten Oates: It does.

Jim Finley: And that doesn't mean at a secondary level there isn't a language that articulates it, which is the teaching of the mystic because Teresa has a certain clarity about her, she can focus it into a concrete example that rings true. And so, there is a language for this. That would be the humility. See, the humility would be the falling away of the posing and posturing that imagines the condition for proceeding is knowing how to proceed because it's like you found me when I was so lost I couldn't even find myself, and to your grace I've been brought right up to this very moment. I couldn't have planned it if I tried it. I think that those would be intimations of humility.

Kirsten Oates: That's beautiful. I'm going to sit with that one for a while. I think that's so helpful to hear it said that way.

Jim Finley: See, then, that is self-knowledge. It's a trans-subjective self-knowledge. Or, Merton says, "To know is to know that you're known." The issue isn't how well do I know you. The issue is how infinitely do you know me? How are you unexplainably revealing yourself to me? In my acknowledgement, I don't know how to proceed.

And so, this is a paradoxical self-knowledge with a poetic voice in a way. That's why when we try to look at it on purpose it goes away. The moment we try to grasp it so we can have it we fall out of the richness, but if we stay in the sustained sincerity of the prayer it carries us along. That door then, is the door in which the present Mansion we're living, we serendipitously fall into a richer level. The cumulative effect of that humility and vulnerability reaches a certain crescendo in which the door flies open and we fall into a qualitatively richer state of this union.

Kirsten Oates: I'm just noticing that you've used the word vulnerability a few times. That might not be a word Teresa would have used, but it seems important to what you're saying.

Jim Finley: I will say it does in this way. When you read Teresa, one of the refrains through her, she'll say I don't know how to figure to say this, or I've been too busy to write the Interior Castle for a

while, and I'm too busy to even look back and see where I left off. Or my head is spinning, and I don't know what to do, or for long periods of time I went about lost in this thing." She's very self-disclosing about the struggle.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yes.

Jim Finley: We know we're more like her than we realize because she's letting us know she's more like us than we realized. We meet each other in this common ground.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. She role models vulnerability in the self she describes—

Jim Finley: She does. But then she would assure us, say we were seeing her in spiritual direction, that she would say, yes, it is true. You're being very vulnerable about this, and I can acknowledge you need to be careful, and it's hard. But I think it's also true, and she was saying this, is what we're talking about, is ultimately irrelevant with respect to the love that's taking you to itself, knowing that humble vulnerability is the condition in which the taking occurs. It's like that, I think. It has that feeling to it.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. She really, I found a lot of encouragement from her for staying humble and the reflecting on our limitations in relation to God. These are tools for this path.

Jim Finley: As a matter of fact, when she's listing the faults of beginners, we'll see John of the Cross says this, too, she says, characteristic of First Mansion people, one is we get discouraged because other people seem to be more holy than we are. Two, we get discouraged because we're not as holy as we want to be. Or we get discouraged because we fell again at some frailty, and we still haven't got past the thing we have to get past. She says these are the still ego-based ways that are revealing us to ourself, see? But if we just get vulnerable and acknowledge these patterns because this is the stuff God works with, this is how God works with it. She's always calling us forward to a certain truthfulness, heartfelt truthfulness about ourself. She says, you know, like, let's start there.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Well, that's beautiful because it doesn't matter what's happening. It's all part of it.

Jim Finley: Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: We can be vulnerable about every piece that's happening. That's it. We're doing it then.

Jim Finley: That's right. Because from the very first moment, the first shimmer of this occurred, where we were still lost in these patterns—reptiles, like caught up in all of them—notice how God found you, and touched you, and accessed you there right in the middle of this lost, fragmented state. She said, "Surely, this is something in which we can place our confidence that God has begun this work in us will bring it to completion."

Kirsten Oates: I wanted to read the quote. This is the First Mansion, chapter 1, page forty, where she says, "During the course of a month, these souls might pray a few times, but their minds are full of a thousand things they are still attached to. Where their treasure lies, says Christ, there also goes their heart. Every once in a while, though, they break free from these things and realize that they are not going the right way to get to the castle's front door. At last, they arrive. They enter the first, lower rooms. But so many reptiles have slipped in with them that

they cannot even see the beauty of the castle or find solace in it. Still, they have done very well to have gotten in at all.” I did want to ask you about the reptiles. What do you think she’s referring to there?

Jim Finley: Yes. It’s a real gift to be interiorly inclined, to want to turn to the mystics like this. Not everyone is so inclined. It’s also a gift to have the opportunity to get a little bit of help finding our way into what the mystics are saying because if we can get a sense of what they’re saying, the constancy of everything they say with practice we need to be very humble and very patient because we’re not used to thinking like this, which is the point. We’re trying to be led into a new way to look at things, understand things, more grace, and so on. We started with Merton because he’s also subtle. He’s not lightweight. You can’t skim read Thomas Merton. But the point is he’s contemporary. He’s very existential. The examples that he uses we relate to like the spirit of the age.

So, what happens then when we’re now turning to a mystic, Teresa is 16th century in Spain, so her repertoire of cultural references, the images that come to her, the very idea of a castle, she used a castle because she looked out and saw them. have you ever been to Europe? Do you see these castles. She sees a castle, but we don’t see a lot of castles here. That wouldn’t necessarily be our—

So, for Merton, he says “the true self,” like that. So, then we have to translate. We’re learning how to, like speaking more than one language. We can also learn to speak in the language of this ancient wisdom in this other epoch and expand our skill set and just appreciate that. The reptiles then, it’s a metaphor for the habits of the mind and heart that compromise what we’re searching for.

We learn them out in the ways of the world before we even knew we had a soul. Sometimes they’re internalized patterns formed in trauma and abandonment. Sometimes they’re patterns of thought that got the better of us and the momentum to reach certain goals to the degree it got out of hand, and we lost who we were in the process. So, we’re interiorly bonded to these self-compromising principles that hinder this deepening, simple vulnerability to this love that loves us so and sustains us in the midst of all these things. I think that’s what she means by reptiles.

Kirsten Oates: I love the visual that they slip in with us, these habits and patterns of our mind and heart that distract us.

Jim Finley: And we do, we carry, like Thich Nhat Hahn, the Buddhist, “Hello, habit energies.” We befriend these habits and understand where they come from, accept them when we work with them. And then we’ll see in the Second Mansion that it goes deeper. We weren’t careless, we were traumatically bonded to the reptiles. They’re survival strategies, and it’s very scary to face them, to understand them and find a deeper love that gives us the courage to let go of them. She said it gets more challenging because you realize the depth of the dilemma, but you’re actually in a much better position because you’re more open to depending on God’s love and God’s mercy to guide you and liberate you.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, also when you were talking earlier about the ego consciousness, is it when she talks about the reptiles, are they parts of those ways that we describe ourselves as you started off

with, “This is my career. I’m this person. I’m this in the world”?

Jim Finley: I would say that there are levels of looking at it. The most blatant is sin. Sin here would be, we might say, are the ways that we’ve given into, out of our own brokenness, given into intentional patterns of engaging and treating ourself and other people and all living things in disrespectful, hurtful ways.

Kirsten Oates: Including ourselves.

Jim Finley: Including ourselves. We’re sinful towards ourself. We fall into these patterns. We abuse ourself. We abandon ourself. We neglect ourself. We do self-attacks on ourself. We sell ourself short. We’re not a safe person to be with sometimes because of the internalized traumatized self that keeps acting out these patterns. Then we tend to treat others the way we treat ourselves because we learn to treat ourself by the people who treated us that way, and we internalized it. And so, we’re trying to tease out these patterns with clarity, and courage, and compassion, and do our inner work.

Kirsten Oates: This is reminding me how you teach that the measure of our growth on this path is love. So, we’re always asking, “Where am I blocking love? Where am I not able to be loving?” Not in a way to condemn ourselves, but just to notice and to invite God’s presence into it.

Jim Finley: That’s right. All things considered, what’s the most loving thing I can do right now for myself, this person, this family, this animal, this plant, the world, all things considered? Then asking that question, it reveals to me how unloving sometimes I can be. Then what’s the most loving thing I can do to be loving towards myself in my infidelity to be loving towards myself, which is the mercy of God. How can I then see mercy upon mercy within mercy, which is the Good News. It’s the Gospel.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you. Beyond the reptiles, she also talks about the spirit of evil that uses nasty tricks to keep us from our souls. What’s a 16th century Spanish mystic referring to with that?

Jim Finley: I think in AA, I think they talk about addiction. I think it’s “powerful, cunning and clever.” I always forget, I think that’s what it is that the addiction is powerful, cunning and clever. It surreptitiously waits in the wings and just when you think you’re past it, it waits for just the moment to come out and re-stake its claim on you one more time, and before you know it, you slipped and fell. Then you get discouraged, so discouraged, you don’t even want to try anymore.

And so, evil then is the naivete. one where we underestimate the patterns of brokenness and, also, the way we attribute to them a power over us they really don’t have. Love is the only authority but the patterns with which we’re subject to self-deception and act out those self-deceptions on ourself and on each other run deep. And so, I’m thinking now as a therapist, in depth therapy work—you know, Socrates: “The unexamined life is not worth living.”—how do I look at myself in the light of this with courage, and honesty, and patience?

Kirsten Oates: She talks about in the First Mansion one that the dwelling is actually bright, but the soul cannot appreciate it. I know, when I was learning Teresa for me the first time, Jim, I won’t be able to say in your exact words, but there was something you said where the brightest light from the very center filters out through the soul and draws us toward itself even while we

cannot see it. And so, I feel like she's trying to give us—

Jim Finley: Let's say as we approach the Sixth and Seventh Mansions, let's say she's guiding us toward this point. Let's say our life, everyone, everything around us, has become transparent to the Divine Light. It's the transparency of the Divine Light filling all things and the light of God filling all the things. But what we're working through are gradients of internalized processes and attitudes that render us first opaque to that when we don't even have a soul. But then in which it shines through dimly because it's shining through the fabric of these internalized patterns. So, every Mansion draws closer and closer.

I have the image of an artist using watercolors. They can start out very dense but as they keep adding water to the watercolor, it can get to a certain point, say where the sky fades, you can barely discern the blue, it just becomes almost like water. So, everything becomes divine as the transparency, so we're working through layers of opacity or density to come to this ever deeper-- That imagery helps me to see that.

And here's another way to put it too. I want to say it another way. Let's say that we're upset with somebody. Say a parent's upset with one of their children about something, or we're in an intimate relationship, and we're upset with the person. We're so upset with him because we've always assumed not just what they did was wrong, which maybe it was, we also assume we know why they did it. Our anger about what they did closes off our access to see them. Then in a moment, they come to us and they admit what they did. But not only do they admit it, they get very vulnerable and share something about themselves that motivated that withholding of love or that anger.

All of a sudden, in the transparency of their self-disclosure, you're able to see a light shining out of them that was previously hidden from you. It's a layering. I think a lot of life is that way. A lot of the function of art has that function too. I think we gaze upon it, or we ponder it, and layers and layers of previous assumptions give way to deeper realization gravitating towards a oneness of something like that. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: I wanted to share that when I read her, I feel a lot of encouragement. I feel like she continues to encourage us along the path and for people to feel encouraged in listening to the Lectio.

Jim Finley: Yes, I'm saying this because of my experience with Merton. I think if we could really sit with her in spiritual direction, or she would just listen while we talked, I think we would feel we were not just in the presence of a very present person, a very godly person, we would sit in the presence of a very accepting person who knew well about human brokenness and limitations, and that she was listening to us in a way that she could see in us something, which is the very thing she's trying to help us find. She'd be endlessly encouraging, like, don't be disheartened. You'll always start over again, over and over again with renewed hope, and learn the lessons that you're learning and your stumbling places and compare where you are now to where you used to be, something's happening, and you're on a journey. I'm convinced that's true.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Beautiful, Jim. Thank you. She does state towards the end of the First Mansion, "True perfection means loving God and loving our neighbor." We did talk about that earlier about the measure of the path is love.

Jim Finley: By the way, this will come up later again into the Fourth Mansion, through the whole book really, is being in love with the infinite love that's infinitely in love with us and is transforming us along this path. But as we're transformed by it, it isn't just that it's radicalized how much in infinite love is in love with us, but it empowers us to love in ways that are beyond anything we ever knew was possible for us. We never even knew it was possible to love like that. And so, there's an existential transformation of the very substance of ourself habituated.

And then the second commandment is "Love your neighbor as yourself," because the measure of this, the authenticity of it, how can we claim we love a God we don't see, if we don't love our brother and sister whom we see? The measure of it is how we treat other people. She always makes-- I like, also, she says, "Sisters, we have to be very careful." We don't see this in global terms, like the cartoon Peanuts: "I love humanity, it's people I can't stand." [laughter] We love humanity, but we're resentful, and bitter, and mean-spirited to other people we live with. She said it's always in the concreteness of the relationship and the people we're called to be real with, and set boundaries with, and accept, because that's where the transformation happens, yeah, with people.

Kirsten Oates: Well, I've loved being with you, Jim. I've loved learning more about the First Mansion. I think this has been incredibly helpful, and I can't imagine anything better to talk about.

Jim Finley: Yes. And I want to say, also, I'm glad we're doing this because when I'm sharing this over and over with people for a long time, these really are the kinds of questions people ask. These are exactly the things, so I hope the listeners find our dialogue helpful here by this. Anyway, thanks for the questions. Yeah. [music]

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. Please consider rating it, writing a review, or sharing it with a friend who might be interested in learning and practicing with this online community. To learn more about the work of James Finley, please visit jamesfinley.org. We'll see you again soon.