

MYSTICAL SOBRIETY

with James Finley

Complete Transcript of all Course Teachings



Desert Transformation, 2021, Anonymous.

Mystical Sobriety with James Finley

Introduction to Mystical Sobriety

Jim Finley:

Greetings, everyone. My name is Jim Finley. I'm sharing these reflections with you out of my experiences, having spent six years in a cloistered Trappist monastery and being introduced to the contemplative way of life in the Christian tradition, open to all the contemplative traditions of the world's great religions. When I left the monastery, I felt called to continue living a contemplative way of life. Then, I felt called to share that with others, which has led to this call to teach this path to sincere seekers in the world, and that's the context in which we're sharing these reflections.

You know, I think there's a way to get some initial understanding as to the nature and purpose of these reflections. Hopefully, it will shed light on an experience that I think all of us have from time to time, and sometimes quite often, actually. There's this feeling that we're so caught up in the momentum of the day's demands. It's hard work being a human being. There's a lot of things to handle, and keep up with, and manage, and cope with. And in the midst of all of it, sometimes we get this feeling that we're skimming over the surface of the depths of our own life. And really, I think what we're suffering from is depth deprivation. We get this feeling we're suffering from depth deprivation. This depth deprivation is all the more regrettable in that the depths over which we're skimming are the depths in which God's oneness with us is hidden, in which God's oneness with us is sustaining us, breath by breath, heartbeat by heartbeat, and rendering everything ultimately holy and meaningful. So, we're missing out on the gift of our own lives.

Thomas Merton once asked: "is it possible you could live your whole life and die without ever having met the person that lived your life?" That possibility, the persona, the mask, the effigy of ourselves, and how do I drop down into the authenticity of being authentically present in the gift and miracle of my daily life? How do I be faithful to what it's asking out of me?

Mystical sobriety is a reverberation or a resonance of an ever-deepening sense of oneness that unexplainably pervades the details of our daily lives. I put it this way: mystical sobriety is realizing there is a wholeness that utterly transcends even as it utterly permeates the fragmentation of our lives. This paradoxical realization that the infinite wholeness of God that utterly transcends, even as it permeates the fragmentations of myself, is the mystical sobriety. It makes the moment, just as it is, to be perpetual homecoming. It makes it perpetually trustworthy, which is the peace that surpasses understanding, which is the peace of sobriety, mystical sobriety.

Mystical Sobriety with James Finley

Introduction to Contemplative Practice

Jim Finley:

You know, first of all I'd say, in these contemplative traditions, practice is so important. We'll be talking more about practice as we go through these reflections. Practice is so important because without practice, this just becomes a poetic way to talk about this, or it becomes an insightful way to talk about it. But, it's in practice [that] we surrender ourselves over to letting this mystery transform us into itself, see, so that our very subjectivity undergoes a divinization in the poverty and silence of our hearts. Thomas Merton once said, "With God, a little sincerity goes a long, long way," and the essence of practice is sincerity, like, "Here I am, Lord."

The practice then is a daily rendezvous with ourselves, or a daily rendezvous with ourselves in the presence of God, or daily rendezvous with God. There's a little liturgy here I do with this, that I'm accustomed to that helps me. The guidelines that help me are that we begin by sitting straight and fold our hands in prayer, and we bow while seated. The Sōtō Zen Master, Shunryū Suzuki, says that "when we bow, we give ourselves up. If ever you get to a place in life where the only thing you can do is bow, you should do it." That's a good statement. That's mystical sobriety. So, there's a liturgy of the body, where when we bow, we give ourselves up. That as contemplative men and contemplative women the least and the most we can do is bow in gratitude for the gift and the miracle of being alive in this moment on this Earth.

Then, in bowing, I'll say from the Psalms, "Be still and know I am God," this eternal stillness, the silence of God. "Be still and know I am God." I'll take off one word each time until I just say the word be, and then I'll ring the bell three times, like this. Then, you would sit in the meditation and prayer. The meditation and prayer will go in two phases. It will begin with reflective prayer, *Lectio Divina*, meditation and prayer, as our grounding place in our daily lives. Then, it will gravitate toward wordless prayer or contemplative prayer; we're being habituated in mystical sobriety. So, to your own self, be true. That is, whatever you do when you're in the presence of God, you would do that with all your heart, that would be your practice.

Then, at the end of the practice, at the end of that meditation—however that might go for you—I'll ring the bell once. And when the bell becomes silent, we bow, and we bow in communal gratitude. It went the way it went; it was more than enough; it's always more than enough. And then, we slowly say The Lord's Prayer together. Then I say, "Mary, Mother of Contemplatives." The response to which is, "Pray for us. He's looked on his servant in her nothingness, henceforth, all generations will call me blessed." And I name two Christian mystics, the response to which is, "Pray for us," which is to bear witness that we're sitting here together in the mystical lineage of the Christian tradition, open to all the mystical lineages of all the world's great religions. So, whatever your vocabulary is for the intimate immediacy of the unexplainable, you'd put those words to the end of this and that would be the practice.

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Grounding in Prayer and Meditation

Jim: Greetings everyone, and welcome to this course on mystical sobriety. And really, as you'll see, it's more of a retreat than a course. I mean, there's information in it, but like Richard Rohr says, turning information into a transformation. So it's a kind of contemplative retreat on the theme of mystical sobriety. And really, we're trying to touch at a very mysterious place inside of us where the presence of God and our suffering touch each other, and we're trying to explore the transformative power of that place within all of us. Some background information. Center for Action and Contemplation first released this course, this retreat, about a year ago as a beta program, encouraging the participants to share their experience of it and any insights they might have as to how to improve it, how it might be improved. And there was a lot of positive comments and reassuring comments. And some found it challenging, but they're glad they took it.

But a particular concern for us are those who found what was challenging for them was in the fourth step, making a fearless and searching moral inventory of our life. I present this exercise on a lifeline where you trace the traumas of your life starting from childhood on through the years and learning to move towards those hurting places for a process of interior healing. And some found that disturbing to them because it triggered their trauma. It triggered and activated their trauma.

And since we're putting so much emphasis here on safety and emphasis on being true to yourself... The program is essentially intended to be reassuring and consoling, but consoling in a way that it kind of intimately ponders and sits with the hurting places. And so in the light of that, there's been some changes. And one of them is this talk I'm giving you now a year later to clarify sensitivity to this point around protecting yourself and being safe and so forth. And so to get at this, I'd like to do it in a way that's true to the spirit of the retreat in a kind of a poetic meditation as a way to begin at the heart of what we're trying to get at here.

The insight is that when we sit in meditation or we sit in interior prayer, we can experience within ourselves that we're making a kind of dissent down into a deeper awareness of and oneness with deeper dimensions of ourself. And as this process continues on deeper, deeper, deeper, in ever so subtle ways, that we realize that the depths of ourselves drops down into and opens out upon the abyss-like depths of God, welling up and giving itself to us unexplainably as the gift in the miracle of our life, our beating heart, our breath, our body, life itself, all things intimately realized. And a kind of homecoming, kind of a homecoming. And this being so, we experience this in different ways.

We wonder then why we tend to avoid it. If it's so amazing and it's so life giving and is so grounding then why do we tend not to commit ourselves to being stabilized there and sharing it with others? And I think one way to understand it is that in this dissent down into the depths of God, deeper, deeper, deeper, dropping down into the depths of God, welling up and giving itself to us as our life, we have to pass down through the internalized traumas and hurts of our life. There's no detour around the hurt to get to the oneness with God that sustains us in the midst of suffering, in the midst of hurt and transforms us and so forth.

And in the language of AA, we're extending this out, really out to all of us because we're all addicted to habits of the mind and heart that perpetuates suffering. And one habit that perpetuates suffering is avoiding the intimacy of ourself for this very reason, the discomfort that comes at getting close to what we need to get closer to be set free. In the language of AA, this is looking at the wreckage of the past as it's taking this fearless inventory is the things that you did that were hurtful to yourself and the people who loved you while you were using and abusing.

And then when you get to the first phase of recovery, which is through your higher power, freedom from the addiction to alcohol or the substance, then you have to face the very things you started drinking so you wouldn't have to feel them. The real deeper work goes there. This applies to all of us then. And so what are some of these hurting places? What forms do they take? One we might be, it's like a litany of sorrows, is irrational fears, feelings of self-loathing, feelings of shame about something about ourself, addictive patterns and sexuality, and the use of food and work, prejudices, withholding intimacy and so on.

And we discover that these energies, we're kind of traumatically bonded to them. And so the whole process then of healing is how to liberate ourself from these energies that compromise our happiness that we're paradoxically kind of addicted to. And so here then is the model for the healing that we're setting up here in this process. Let's say first we begin first by grounding ourself in this meditative stance, in this inner descent, in a daily rendezvous with God and meditation and prayer. And we draw up from that intimately sensed oneness with God or God's oneness with us, the courage and the clarity to draw close to the hurting places so that we might touch the hurting places with love so that the hurting places might dissolve in love until only love is left.

But here's the thing. If we don't do this, if we don't draw close enough to touch the hurt with love, it tends to fester within us and sometimes tends to get worse. But if we move too fast, we get retraumatized because in the touch of love, growing close to touch the hurting place with love, the shame-based pattern, whatever it is, the thorn in the flesh, in that touch of love, some of the suffering we're touching flows back through the touch into us.

And that's necessary. We have to be... That's part of love's work. But if it gets too strong, we can tell we're getting overwhelmed. So what we do is we back away, not to keep running in the other direction, but to be grounded again in the love of God in a meditative stance so that we might once again draw up for the love of God, this love that we wish returned to touch the hurting place. So if we don't go near it, it never gets better. If we move too fast, we get retraumatized. And if we try to do it all on our own, we get overwhelmed. So how can we then find, in God's oneness with us, the courage and the clarity and they resolve to engage in love's work? And by doing that over and over and over again, it transforms our character. It changes us inside, and we grow an experiential self-knowledge about the grace of God transcending and permeating the broken places, unexplainably in all directions.

We learn firsthand the mystery of human fragility. We learn the primacy of humility, the primacy of patience, the primacy of trust, that they say in AA, slow progress marked by heavy setbacks, and not becoming disheartened, but to get up and try again and again, engaging in this transformative work in a patient, calm, courageous, grounded way. This is what we're talking about, really.

And it becomes, I think not just graced, but it has the potential becoming mystical. That somehow God's love is the infinity of the intimacy of the broken places, deeply accepted, deeply walked with, deeply leaned into and worked on, not just within oneself, but on the people around us changes our life, like having had a spiritual awakening as a result of following these steps. See, that's the paradoxical awakening.

So the concern then, for us, then is if... And this is what makes this retreat so personal. So if you start the lifeline exercise, starting your own traumas, and you start to get triggered, not just where it stirs up the suffering because you're getting close to the memory, but it really is disturbing, back off. As a matter of fact, put it another way, here's a list of concerns we might say, is if you have a history of trauma, some of which is still untreated, if you're struggling with depression, you're struggling with anxiety, you're struggling with feelings of self-loathing, you're struggling with a deep sense of confusion and uncertainty about yourself, you have an issue, you can get flooded by intense, painful emotions and you can't find your way out, approach all this with extreme caution. Really. It's meant to be very consoling. If you're in therapy, talk to your therapist about it.

And to your own self be true. If the lifeline exercise bothers you, don't do it. You don't need to do it. Skip it. Go and be true to yourself. And that's the most important thing, I think, in this. See, because it's the willingness to draw close to what really hurts is what makes the transformation real. And knowing that with God's grace you how to take care of yourself is what makes it safe. It needs to be real, and it needs to be safe. And what we find is that the joy of life, the happiness of life starts shining out, not just from happy places and happy circumstances. We want all those that we can find. But in some strange way, there's a kind of an interior joy that shines out through the broken places, deeply seen, deeply accepted, that you're God's beloved, and God's sustaining you, unexplainably, forever in the midst of everything that's unresolved in your mind and heart like this.

So these are some changes that we made then in the light of being especially sensitive to the vulnerability aspect of this work. The first one was the presentation of this conference that I just shared with you just now was an important one. Secondly, we took the 11th step, increasing conscious contact with God through prayer and meditation, and we moved it up so it comes sooner. So we're still working as fine-tuning this. I think a good place to do that would be we'd start with admitting that we're powerless, the first step. We'll talk about the transformative power of admitting.

We realize then that there's this power greater than ourselves that can achieve in us what we're powerless to achieve. It's kind of a faith. And then we do handing ourselves over to the care of that higher power, which is a kind of intimate kind of trust. So the recovering

alcoholic says to God, the higher power, as they walk this walk, to their higher power, "I don't know who you are, but I do know who you are. You're the one who saved my life. And there's a lot of ways I don't know myself, but I do because I'm the one you saved." There's this intimacy.

And then doing the 11th step there, focusing on a poetic exploration of meditation practice and then continuing on with inventory and amends and so on. And then doing the 11th step again toward the end. And we thought that would be another moved in the right direction in the light of these concerns here. Another thing that they added is that the program itself, this retreat I think is 12 weeks. Another thing they added is some downtime. I think it's 90 days downtime, I believe, to just internalize this within yourself. And then I have a finalized Zoom call together. We'll have a Zoom call together.

And I'd like to end on this note, I thought. Is imagine within yourself, it's like doing, in AA, doing Big Book work and inner work in the program, your meditation practice, whatever. Well, what if you would continue on in this way, walking this walk, and you would do the lifeline exercise every year for 10 years. You do it every year for 10 years, so that if where you are now on the journey, you could see what your lifeline would look like 10 years from now. You'd be surprised because you've changed.

It's like where you are now, is it not true that if you look back, say you find a journal that you wrote 10 years ago, even forgot you wrote it, and you sit down, you read your own journal, the things you're worried about, the things you thought were important, the assumptions you made about who you are, it's such a strange experience. But we labor under the illusion we're finally figuring it out. See? Because if the you that wrote the journal 10 years ago could see the you that's reading it now, that person would faint. But we're laboring under the illusion we're figuring out. So if you could see the person who's going to read tonight's journal 10 years from now, you'd faint again.

And I think we're rehearsing for heaven, I think God's great surprise party at the end when the gate flies open like this. We're on an arc of grace transformation to a beautiful, graced, loving, brutal, dark, brief, and unfair world and how to walk it with love and walk it with clarity, to be a healing presence in an all too often traumatized and traumatizing world. So those are my initial thoughts that I hope help set the tone for you entering into this retreat experience, mystical sobriety.

Mystical Sobriety with James Finley

Deep Listening

Jim Finley: I'd like to kind of suggest a context for this, how each one of you might take it personally to heart in a way that would be helpful to you. So I want to share my sense of all this, and talking in this way about ourselves, really. Is that, imagine that you've asked come see me for therapy. And imagine that I don't know anything you want to talk to me about, except the little bit you told me on the phone. But I already, I've done it so many times with so many people. I already know in advance what's going to have to happen, if the healing you're hoping for is going to occur in our time together.

And here's what will happen, it's like a liturgy of healing. Is that you'll come for the session, we'll both sit down, you'll talk and I'll listen. And as you talk, I'll stop you at a certain point. And I say, "I want to ask you a question to help me understand better what you're saying."

And the question, and it's a real question too. It's not a trick question. I really want to join you in what you're saying. And the question I ask is such, you can't respond to me without pausing for a moment to listen more deeply to yourself. And in that little moment of pausing, you're becoming more present to yourself in my presence. And as you become more present to yourself in my presence, an intimate interconnectedness is already starting to form between us.

And when you share what you're going to share, we listen together to your disclosures. And as we talk about it, we go on a little bit more. And I say, "Do you think we're together so far?"

You say, yeah. Yeah, me too, me too. In which case I have another question. If this and this, what I don't understand yet. And the question I ask is such you have to listen more deeply to yourself. And little by little or at once we get close to the hurting place. And we'll know we're getting close to it because as you'll tear up, or you'll laugh when you say something sad, or there will be a shift in your body.

And then I say to you, one zen master one said, "Get too close to my fireplace, you burn to death. Get too far away, you freeze to death." If we don't get close enough to touch it, it'll fester. And if we get too close, too fast, it'll overwhelm you, and there'll be a protective place in you that'll shut this down. So we need to find a way here where it can be safe enough to be safe and vulnerable at the same time. As a kind of a trust with us here and with yourself.

So it seems to me, I'm so sensitive to this. Where we need to be really careful about being honest with the reality of ourself in the midst of our own unfolding story. And that kind of sensitivity ... See, if I take something ... Unless I don't, unless I choose something that really hurts, then it's not real. It isn't real.

But if I'm not careful to pace my closeness to what hurts, it's not safe to go on. So there's this balance between a kind of respectful pacing of the vulnerability in the presence of the truthfulness of what hurts, is what takes us through the healing process that leads to this deep sobriety. And I think it's important to be sensitive to those kinds of things when we talk like this.

Mystical Sobriety with James Finley

Safety First and the Warning of Being Retraumatized

Jim Finley: Let's say, first of all, that it's very clear to you that you're fortunate that your traumatizations have been unintended slights and hurts. And there's enough inner reserves, enough resiliency to cope and deal with it. Then go for it, walk through this and do this. And if there's someone to share it with, share it, if not, journal it out. But always safety first, and sometimes in getting close to this, you can be retraumatized and you shouldn't do it, you should not do it. By the way, insofar there are still things you can't get too close to without getting flooded, it's possibly unfinished business in your heart. And therefore, it may possibly, maybe, maybe not, to consider getting some help with that. But one, it would be hubris to just go barging into all this pain and it'd be very unwise.

And so we're always talking about that setting boundaries with yourself in pacing your tolerance level, because until there's enough connectedness with the love that loves you so in your preciousness, the intensity and density of the pain will flood you. And so you're always being sure that you're grounded enough in the sustaining love, to touch the hurting place, to carry that love through into the hurt and not get overwhelmed by the hurt, there's that. There's another piece of this, about sharing this with somebody.

You're always being sensitive. To what extent is this person capable of listening to me at this level? And if you've not gotten any evidence of their willingness to meet at this level, their ability to meet you at this level, you would be unfair to yourself and unfair to them to go looking. "Would you mind if I sit down and tell you the tragedy of my life?" And we just need to be very careful. They are always acting in reality based grounded ways with everybody. And with that said, then one would work through this way of the interiority of inventory shared with somebody, a sponsor, a therapist, a friend, or just with yourself in the presence of God, is you journal it out. And you've integrated into yourself, the unfinished pieces of your own brokenness like that. Yeah.

Mystical Sobriety with James Finley

The Grace and Work of Mystical Sobriety

Jim Finley:

Greetings, everyone. My name is Jim Finley and I'll begin by welcoming you to these reflections on mystical sobriety. As a way to get started, I'd like to share with you some background information to clarify the nature of our subject matter, like what is meant by mystical sobriety. It comes out of my own story of when I graduated from high school in 1961, I entered the cloistered Trappist monastery at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, and lived there as a member of the community for nearly six years. During that time, I learned to live a contemplative way of life. I would say, too, that I was introduced to the mystical lineage of my own Christian tradition. Through Thomas Merton, who was novice master at the time, I learned that my own lineage of mystical union in the Christian tradition was in concert with the mystical traditions of all the world's great religions as well as in some poets and philosophers and artists; and those who serve the poor; and many people who live a life of devotional sincerity.

When I left the monastery in 1967, I wanted as much as ever to continue living the contemplative way of life. I got married; I had two children. I taught religion in the Catholic schools of the Cleveland Diocese. And, I wrote a book called *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* on Thomas Merton's understanding of ultimate identity beyond ego. When that book came out, I began to give retreats around the United States and Canada at Catholic retreat houses on contemplative living. In these retreats, I would take a text—classical texts mainly, one of the Christian mystics—and show how this profound experience of God's oneness with us in all things, how all of us can aspire to learn to come to that experience and to live by it, and to share it with others day-by-day.

It was in this context that I met Fr. Richard Rohr because when I was on the circuit giving these retreats, he was out giving retreats. I saw that what Thomas Merton was doing in the monastery in the Benedictine Cistercian tradition, Fr. Richard Rohr was doing in the Franciscan tradition: that is, how to help Christians in today's world rediscover the mystical lineage of their own Christian faith, open to all lineages, open to service to the world. That eventually led to me being invited to be one of the core teachers along with Cynthia Bourgeault in the Center for Action and Contemplation, and that's really the context in which I'm here.

I'm here to share with you these reflections on the art of contemplative living in the world. Like, how is it possible to come to this deep abiding experience of God's oneness in our life, to live by it day-by-day, to share it with others in service to the world? Now, I would say at this point, too, I had no real contact with the Twelve Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous. I knew about addiction because my father was a violent alcoholic. And so, I saw firsthand what it did to him. He died in his disease, really brought him down. I also saw what, out of his addiction, he did to all of us, what he did to me, to my siblings, to my mother. So I knew the sorrow of it all, and in a way, I went to the monastery, I think, seeking refuge from that. One of the sayings in AA is: are you a friend of Bill Wilson? Bill Wilson founded Alcoholics Anonymous, which is a polite way of asking, are you in recovery?

So I'm neither burdened nor blessed to be a friend of Bill Wilson; but, I was able to discover in my contact with people in recovery, that there's something about being in recovery that's like being in a monastery. That there's an affinity or a [resonance] with this, that all of us are addicted to habits of the mind and heart that cause suffering. What really particularly struck me, is in Alcoholics Anonymous, they have the Twelve Steps, but they also have the Twelve Promises.

Jim Finley:

So I'd like to read you the Twelve Promises:

"We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain insight into our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook will change. Fear of people and economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them."

What strikes me about these Promises is that there isn't a single mention of alcohol in the Promises, but there is bearing witness to having arrived at really a profound state of inner peace, which I'm calling here in this broad sense of sobriety. I would say that we could understand sobriety as a state of inner peace and clarity that flows from having discovered how to be one with life as it really is, and having discovered that it's miraculous, that it's sacred, that it's holy, that it's a gift beyond compare. This gifted way of life, this sobriety, is not easily come to. It's not easily come to because it comes about only by passing beyond or letting go of, or having died to habits of the mind and heart that cause suffering. And here really is a great dilemma, really: we're all strangely addicted to habits of the mind and heart that hinder us from realizing the wholeness that we long for, see. We're traumatically bonded in intricate patterns of confusion and loss. It's by working our way through these intricacies, through the grace of the Higher Power, that we're able to come to this sobriety. You know, they wisely say in the Twelve Steps, too... They refer to, all of this comes about through one's Higher Power, and it's our understanding of God as we understand him so it's open to all traditions.

So, I want to share with you here in the spirit of the Center for Action and Contemplation, in the spirit of the mystical traditions of my own Christian faith, I want to share how I understand it in terms of my own life as a Christian, as a contemplative Christian, who's also been deeply influenced by the contemplative traditions of the other world's great religions. Putting it this way then, I would further clarify sobriety, which is our subject matter here, is that Jesus says, "My peace I give you, my peace I give unto you, not as the world gives do I give unto you."

So, what is the peace of the world? The peace of the world is a peace that's dependent on learning and being able to live in conditions conducive to peace. Yeah? If I can live in conditions conducive to peace, if my physical health, my emotional health, my career, my job, my family, my loved ones, if all these conditions are stabilized, then I have peace. I have peace and it brings with it a sense of gratitude. It brings with it a sense of security, and that's real. We're human beings and that's real. But the peace that Jesus brings, which is the peace of mystical sobriety, is a peace that's not dependent on being able to live in conditions conducive to peace. Even though the conditions in which I've been through, the conditions maybe that I'm still in are not at all conducive to peace, I am at peace because somehow the taproot of my heart is grounded in the presence of God that protects me from nothing, even as the presence of God unexplainably sustains me in all things. So, my sense here of mystical sobriety then: it doesn't mean at all that we're not sad when sad things happen. It doesn't mean that we're not afraid when scary things happen. Rather, it means that sadness, and fear, and all emotions that embody suffering no longer have tyranny over our minds and hearts.

Jim Finley:

To live in mystical sobriety, this peace of God that surpasses understanding, it doesn't mean that we no longer suffer. It does mean one of the signs of its authenticity is our commitment to nonviolence, our commitment not to cause suffering. It does mean that when suffering occurs, we do our best to liberate ourselves and others from suffering. But as for the suffering that remains, the thread of suffering, that it doesn't lie within our power to free ourselves from, it does mean that we're learning to be free from the tyranny of suffering in the midst of suffering, is sobriety. And it certainly doesn't mean to find our way to the sobriety that we're not going to die someday. Rather, it means that we're learning to know and trust that when the hour of our death finally comes, we will die free of the tyranny of death in the midst of death. As a matter of fact, I think here, this gives us a little window to clarify in tangible terms this way we're using sobriety here.

(sirens blaring)

In regard to noises, I want to share something. This is contemplative living in the midst of the world. I'm sharing this here through the auspices of the Center for Action and Contemplation at St. Monica's Parish in Santa Monica, which is my parish, my contemplative prayer group meets here. And we're in a little chapel here in the pastoral center. I have to say, too, personally for me, this chapel is dedicated to St. André Bessette. And for me personally, Brother André was a Holy Cross Brother in Montréal. And my mother was French-speaking Canadian, and she lived in Montréal. And Brother André was the porter at the monastery. So when people would come to the monastery, he would go to meet them and go back in. He would sit all day long in church. Sometimes he'd get up and pray through the whole night. And there were healings that started to happen. The chapel where he sat was covered with wheelchairs and so on. And so really he crossed over; he crossed over. So the fact that this chapel is dedicated to Brother André, which goes back through my grandmother, which interestingly goes back to this lineage, this contemplative, mystical lineage, is so providential, synchronistic for me. And since we're in Santa Monica, California, you might hear an ambulance go by or whatever. And so we're in the real world. It's a world you live in. It's the world I live in and it concretizes this in a real way, I think.

So in the stages of dying, you know, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and this pioneer work that she did on dying and working with dying patients, she found that people when they die, they go through these stages of dying, and it first begins with a sense of denial. You can't believe it's true. Then when you get through the denial and it is true, then there's anger. Then the anger leads to bargaining, you try to strike a deal. See? "Just get me out of this and I'll do this." And when the bargaining doesn't work, there's depression. Going through these phases, some people come to acceptance. The first stages of dying are all pertaining to the ego. That is, they're all understandably what happens to us psychologically when an ego consciousness, we're coming to the demise of who we are in ego consciousness. Acceptance is beyond the ego. She says when you're in the presence of someone like this, she says, it's uncanny to be with them. I think it's especially powerful if it's a dying loved one, if it's your own mother or your own father. There's this strange feeling that they're still here, but they've already crossed over. When you look into their face, you're looking into the gate of heaven and there's no fear there. There is no fear there. Sorrow has no foundations, and everything is unexplainably more than okay. The dying person in the state of degree of acceptance is what I'm calling mystical sobriety.

And so, the question is, it would be great not to wait until the last few minutes to get there, see? Wouldn't it be great if I could learn, if you could learn, to live in this mystical sobriety day by day by day, so that we could become someone in whose presence other people are better

Jim Finley:

able to live in it also? And that's what these talks are about. Now, there's another piece of this, too, as we move toward the Twelve Steps. Yes, when I first started giving retreats, these contemplative retreats, there was a psychologist who was on one of the retreats. The psychologist told me that if I would be willing to integrate the work I was doing in the mystics with mental health, he would see to it that I could have a Ph.D. in clinical psychology as a gift, with family support, not a loan, just give it to me. I just had to commit myself to how could I integrate the wisdom traditions with mental health. I took him up on his offer, and so I spent five years in full-time doctoral work at the Graduate School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena and went through those five years of study. That's when I had this encounter at an AA meeting, which I'm now going to share with you, which brings us to these talks.

This event happened, I'm about to describe, happened I think it would have been...I was in my fifth and final year of my doctoral studies at Fuller. I was grateful for the doctorate; I was grateful for the chance to be a clinician. It meant a great deal to me. But at this time, I was also exhausted. It took a big toll on me, and I think I was just hanging on for dear life, really, just to get through it. Also at this time, my marriage was falling apart and I was a Catholic: I didn't believe in divorce. I never thought it could occur to me, but it was happening to me. Also, I could see how the nightmare that was going on between my wife and I at the time, my wife and myself, was spilling over onto our children. I felt very badly about that, but I couldn't see anything I could do about that. Also, I was going into my long overdue psychotherapy for post-traumatic stress disorder from the trauma that I went through in my childhood. Also, I was starting to see people in a private practice working primarily with trauma. So, I was listening to a lot of trauma stories from people, trying to take this in and deal with case management, and just sitting in the presence of a traumatized person. So, all these things were going on at once.

And lastly, and I would say this is the most critical thing here with respect to us here, is that although I was coming to the end of my doctoral studies, I felt that I had not yet come to the point that I could articulate the contribution that the mystical traditions make to mental health. I knew that it was there and I could feel it in myself and the people that were coming to me, but I didn't know how I could say it in a way that could help people. And I wasn't sure I would ever be able to say it. And at this time then, as all this was going on, I was going through one of my years of internship for my doctoral training and it was at a V.A. hospital. I did one rotation with terminal patients. I did one on a locked psychiatric unit and then I did one on an inpatient alcohol treatment unit, and these would be Vietnam vets. I would say diagnostically they would meet the criteria for dual diagnosis, that a lot of them had post-traumatic stress disorder and a lot of them would qualify for alcohol addiction, alcohol abuse, and dependency.

I was told when I came on this unit, with no previous exposure to AA itself as a path, I was told when I got there, the first morning that I was there, that there was an initiation rite that was devised by the men on the unit some years earlier and was handed down as kind of a secret oral tradition. The morning that I arrived, there was going to be one of these initiation rites. So the person coming onto the unit had to pass this initiation rite to get onto the unit. And this is a guy with the DTs sleeping under the bushes, a guy literally dying of alcoholism. There was a waiting list to get into the unit. When I walked into the room where this initiation rite was to take place, it was a large room. The middle of the room was completely...it was empty, and the chairs were lined up around the four walls of the room. It reminded me of a Zen meditation hall. In the middle of the room were two chairs facing each other about four feet apart, and all the men on the unit, they came in and they sat down.

Jim Finley:

The recovering alcoholic went out that was going to lead this initiation rite, brought this recovering alcoholic in, and asked him to sit down in one of the chairs. The one leading the rite sat down in the other chair. All the guys in the unit had their eyes lowered towards the ground, so there were no smiles; there was no eye contact. Serious as death, which it was. And it was complete silence. And in the silence, the one leading the initiation rite asked the alcoholic, "What do you love the most?" And first I was struck by the intimacy of the question. Not what you say you love the most. Not what you tell yourself you love the most, but based by the way you live, what do you love the most? And the person not knowing quite what to say said, "My wife"; at which point, everyone in the room screamed as loud as they could, "Bullshit!" Like this. And there was this exaggerated startle response, and they all looked down again, deadly serious like this, silence. What do you love the most? I think he said my children. "Bullshit!" What do you...? "Bullshit!" And finally, he said alcohol and when he said alcohol, they all stood up. They had him stand up and they gave him a standing ovation. Then in complete silence, they came up one at a time and each one held him like this, and when they held him, he started crying. I knew this was the first time this man had been touched in a long, long time, really.

The voice that speaks inside of me at such times said, "This is just like at the monastery," see? "That is what's happening right now in this place with these people; this is what monasteries are for, really." Then I knew I had found this missing piece for me about what it is that mystical traditions contribute to mental health. And then I knew, within a matter of hours, I think, what I was to do. I was to take this man standing there, crying. And I started crying, too, I should say because I think contemplative experience recognizes itself. That is when you know it, you can tell when you're in the presence of it. There was a homecoming or a gathering with each other in that moment. So I knew that I was to take this person and turn to him to mentor me in finding the words to express this mystical dimension of freedom, inner peace, this deep, profound sobriety in the world. And so what I did then was that...I would say this, too, in this moment, he was experiencing momentary mystical sobriety. I would also say in this moment, which would become clearer as we go along here, that he was a momentary mystic, I would say.

So, I started writing down for myself that the qualities that he was manifesting in the world at that moment, like: how was he in the moment this was occurring to him as he was standing there with the tears coming down his face? The first thing that occurred to me [was]: in this moment, he was vulnerable, and in his vulnerability, true invincibility was being manifested perfectly in the world. Thomas Merton once said, "There is that in us that is not subject to the brutalities of our own will." That no matter how badly we may have trashed ourselves, there is that in us that remains completely untrashed, unthreatened, and undiminished because it's that in us that belongs completely to God. So in his very vulnerability, this invincibility was being manifested in the world. Next, seems to me, this person was childlike, not childish, but childlike in that he was guileless. He was open-faced. That's what makes children so disarming. They're so disarmingly present. He was childlike in that radical sense, and in being so childlike, true maturity was being manifested in the world, that the truly mature person is the truly childlike person because I think it's a way of realizing within our hearts that ultimately speaking, the universe is benign. See? That ultimately speaking, everything's unexplainably more than okay. And in this kind of childlike wonder, Jesus says, "Amen I say to you, unless you accept the kingdom of God as a small child, you will not enter it." I would say in this moment, the person was entering the kingdom of God, which is this childlike wisdom of maturity. Next, in this moment, the person was in solitude. That he was unto himself. He was unto himself. And it seems to me, one way of understanding solitude is that solitude is the experience of being less and less able to explain to anybody, including yourself, what's happening to you. See? I know not what to make of it, but that which I cannot explain is happening to me. And I can't explain it to anybody because I can't explain it myself.

Jim Finley:

In this sense then, Plotinus says, "Never less alone than when alone." He was alone with the alone and he was alone in his solitude. And in his solitude, to quote the psychologist Winnicott, that he manifested that "we are all alone together. We are all alone together." This is what makes true community possible. See? That in his solitude, it opened up upon the solitude of everyone in that room with him. I would say it entered into the solitude of everyone in the whole world, that we are all alone together. This is the contemplative nature of contemplative community in the world. Next, I'd also say that this person in this moment, that he knew nothing. He knew nothing. All that bravado that alcoholics have, all these excuses and explanations for things and all the rationalizations and all of that, he was bereft of knowing anything, really. There were no reference points in reflective consciousness with which he could stand at this moment. And in knowing nothing, the mystery of unknowing was manifested perfectly in the world. That is to say, it's a deeper way to understand what it means to understand. For us in ego consciousness, to understand is to conceptually comprehend. We say, "Oh, I get it." And that's real. That is real, see?

But there's a deeper way to understand what it means to understand, see, which is a trans-conceptual realization beyond all explanations, so that I'm just in this deep kind of wisdom that's manifested in ways beyond what the thinking self and all that it thinks it can attain, like this. Next, it was in this moment, he was silent. He was silent. I once attended a Christian Zen retreat, a session retreat, a meditation-intensive retreat. It was led by this Jesuit priest, Hans Conan from the Netherlands. So, there were like five to eight hours a day of sitting practice and liturgy and so on. And in one of his little Christian Dharma talks he said, "You know, there [are] different kinds of silence." He says, "There's imposed silence, where we're silent because we're told we have to be. Then he said, "There's chosen silence, where you choose to be silent." And then he says, "Then there's eternal silence." There's eternal silence. Thomas Merton once said at the monastery to the monks, giving a sermon in the monastery, and it was completely silent in the monastery. We didn't talk to each other. He said, you know: "Sometimes we think we're real because we make noise, and we think the more noise we make, the more real we are. We should always remember that all of our noise came out of eternal silence and is quickly going to return to it." See? This eternal silence is the infinity of silence. God is the infinity of silence. And the question is, can we become so silent that we can hear God speaking us into being, see? Can we become so silent that we can hear God loving us into the present moment? So this is this deep silence that somehow embodies in the world the silence of God.

I'd also say this then, that when this person speaks, when he does say something—he didn't say anything here—but when he would speak out of that silence, it's the word that touches hearts. You can tell when you're in the presence of someone who's talking from a deep place. And deep calls unto deep. Deep calls unto deep. And really, it's the power of words to bear witness to what words can't say. Thomas Merton called it spiritual communication. By the way, which is the language of recovery. It's the language of lovers. It's the language of poets. It's the language of philosophers: philosophia, the love of wisdom. It's the language of healing. It's not what Heidegger called chatter, but rather it's the true word that expresses the very essence of one's awakened self. And in this moment then was this deep silence. Next, I would say, that in this moment this person was dying before our very eyes. What was dying was the illusion that the alcoholic in him had the final word in who he was. It is not true. It is not true. And in that death then, the room, in a sense, was a hospice in a way. In that very death, he was being born before our very eyes, and so the hospice was a maternity unit. See? And really what was being manifested is the mystery of life out of death: the still point of the turning world. And I thought, you know, these guys when they were coming up and holding him like this, at one level, I thought that in a way, they were coming to welcome him into their midst, which I think was true, in a way. But I think at another level, they were coming up to get...John Briere does his

Jim Finley:

trauma work and he talks about the golden glow. I think they were coming up to get close to the golden glow, fresh from the opening. Like this person was reminding them of this virginal newness that was so radicalizing their own life like this.

So this was quite a moment for me, really. It really was. Then when I came to realize, which was so clear, that as beautiful as this moment was, and as true as it was, he couldn't live there. He couldn't live there. The reason he couldn't live there is that he was an alcoholic, see? He was an alcoholic. Because clearly, the alcoholic in him was not going to politely step back and let go of its claim on his life. It would quickly reinstate its claim on him like this. He couldn't live there. But what he could do, although he couldn't live in the way of the mystic, it was like a momentary foreshadowing of something that's habitually possible. What he could do is to follow what I call, the path of the saints. What is the path of the saints? It's a thousand gestures of kindness. It's the willingness to start over again, over and over, and over again. When St. Benedict started his monastery in the fifth century, someone asked him, "What do you monks do in that monastery all day?" And he said, "Fall down and get up, fall down and get up, fall down and get up, fall down and get up." And he could walk the walk. He could walk the walk in the support of the community who was walking the walk.

Therefore, what you have in AA, is what you have in all the teachings of the mystics: there is bearing witness to the God-given godly nature of ourselves, that is it's bearing witness that God's oneness with us is the reality of us. Or, if we think of God as generosity, that we are the generosity of God, and it shines forth in the world unexplainably like this. Then, when the light dims, see, then it gives rise to a desire for a more daily abiding awareness of the depth so fleetingly glimpsed. See? I know there is this depth because I experienced it for myself. And I will not play the cynic. I will not break faith with my awakened heart. So how can I learn to stabilize myself in that clarity? Really, the divinity of myself, like the infinity of incarnational infinity.

Each mystic has his or her own language for this path. So for St. John of the Cross, it's found in passage through a dark night, where Teresa of Ávila is entering through the mansions of the soul. For Meister Eckhart, it's a path of detachment. It gives birth to the word in the soul, leading to breakthrough into the Godhead. For *The Cloud of Unknowing*, it's learning to live in this cloud of unknowing. But in the mystical dimensions of sobriety, it's the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. I'm suggesting here that if we pay close attention to the Twelve Steps in the same way we had paid deep attention to Scripture, or we paid deep attention to the teachings of a mystic, the precision of the language [is an] opening into mystical sobriety and they mark out this path.

Now, a couple of days later, I was seeing somebody in this private practice I was seeing people in, still taking all this in, and this woman came in to see me for therapy. She was a young woman, newly married; she'd been married maybe a year or two. And she came into therapy because she said she was depressed and she was having marital problems. So during the intake, finding out about her story and so on, it turns out that she was.... Her husband, he wasn't abusive; he wasn't physically abusive. She wasn't at risk that way, but he was consistently verbally abusive to her, demeaning to her, talking to her in a mean, hurtful way. Interestingly enough, it's how her father talked to her mother, and how her father talked to her—ritualistic reenactment. We're kind of drawn to the unfinished business of our own broken heart, really. And I said, "Well, what do you do?" I could tell she was getting upset when she started talking about this. And I said, "Well, what do you do when he does this?" She said, "I don't do anything when he does it." And I said, "Never?" She said, "Well, once I did. We were having dinner and he was telling me I didn't do the dinner correctly, which he often does. In his anger at me, he

Jim Finley:

reached over and grabbed some food off of my plate and he threw it against the wall and something in me snapped. And I reached over and grabbed some of food off of his plate and threw it against the wall." And she said, "He looked at me with complete shock and disbelief," and he said, "this will not work with both of us being like this," really. I thought, you know, the man was a prophet, really. He was onto something. However, sadly enough, there are marriages where people go on and on treating each other like that, actually. And she said, "So I was so careful to never do it again." And I said to her, "Well, how can I help you?" She said, "I'm here to save my marriage." She said, "As a matter of fact, my husband drove me over here. Hopefully, that with therapy, I'll become the wife he deserves. And he's going to pick me up outside on the street and he's going to want me to tell him everything that you said to see if you measure up or not." And we were both drinking a cup of hot tea. I gave her some tea; I had some tea. And I said to her, you know, I said, "Let's say you and I decide we want to work with each other, and at the beginning of each session, I throw my hot tea on you and I say, the first goal of therapy is to get used to that. What would happen to you inside if you ever did?" And she stopped and she looked down. And I can remember she started crying because I remember a tear hit the back of her hand. I remember. And in a very low voice, and you could tell she didn't know what she was about to say, she said, "Maybe the reason I'm trying so hard to save my marriage is that I don't believe I have a right to save myself." We sat together in the truth of what she just said. The truth will set you free. The truth will set you free.

In that moment, she was vulnerable, and in her vulnerability, invincibility was manifested in the world. In that moment, she was childlike. And in that moment, maturity was being manifested in the world. In that moment, she was alone; she was unto herself. That it opened not upon the solitude of everyone, me and her together, everyone in the whole world. In this moment, she knew nothing. She was bereft of answers or explanations, which opened out on the wisdom of unknowing, which is experiential humility. And so on, down the litany, see? She was dying before my very eyes, see? And I said to her as a person for whom her fear-based dependency on being passively in collusion with the abuse, had the final say in who she was. That's when I saw then that the.... But she couldn't.... And in this moment, you know when someone talks like this, when you just said the truth, your body relaxes into the truth of what you just said, like your body lets you know the truth was spoken. She relaxed into the truth she just heard herself say, like this.

But again, she couldn't live there. She couldn't live there. Why? He was going to pick her up out front, take her home. See? So, what is the path by which she could learn to come to this sobriety, this kind of deep peace, that's grounded in the truth of her life in the invincible preciousness of herself? I have a right to be here. I have a right to be here. I have a right to stand up and be myself in the world, and I can live in the truth of my life like this. And then I began to see that the language of the Twelve Steps applied to her, and that's what I want to do with us here. I hope to speak here in a way that those of you who are in recovery will feel I'm being true to the spirit of recovery. I hope that you sense that.

I gave this material twice at the Betty Ford Center to a group of long-time alcoholics and some staff members, and I was encouraged by it. They felt that it's kind of like in the spirit of things here. So I hope those of you who are in recovery feel that we're true to the spirit of recovery. But I also hope those of you here who are not in recovery, as an addiction to alcohol or mood-altering substances, will be able to see here that these are radicalizations of how we're interiorly awakened and set free from being addicted to the habits of the mind and heart that hinder us from living in the wholeness that we long for. That we're all in this together. That we're all in this together. So my thought here then, this is our tone for the whole thing. My thought is that we

Jim Finley:

would start with the First Step and we would [prayerfully], and intuitively, and experientially walk through these steps, as opening up a path [that] leads us to this mystical sobriety. In the Eleventh Step, which is increasing conscious contact with God as we understand Him, how we can Eleventh Step each step, [that] is how we can ground each phase of our healing journey in prayer and meditation so that it can wash back over our daily lives. And this then, I think, sets the tone for this journey that we're about to make here together. Well, we've already started, really, I would think. So, [we'll] begin in that way.

Mystical Sobriety with James Finley

The Groundless Jump

Jim Finley:

We're in the midst of beginning to explore mystical sobriety. And I'd like to pick up where we left off by re-grounding ourselves in this coming to some initial sense of what's meant by mystical sobriety because it's profound; it's very profound. It's, I think in some ways, strangely familiar to all of us. We long for it, but it's also elusive. So, we're looking for a way, which is what all these mystical traditions do, to bear witness to it. Because once we bear witness to it, we can then follow the path that leads us towards being able to abide in this sobriety and share it with other people. So, I would like to do that first then.

We're saying then that this sobriety, this mystical sobriety in this Christian language for this, is having found our way to the peace of God that surpasses understanding, and that it's a peace that is not dependent on the ability to live in conditions conducive to peace. We're certainly, like everyone else, very sensitive to conditions that cause suffering. One of the marks that this whole path is authentic is our commitment to be a non-violent person, who is protective and nurturing; and when suffering does occur, our commitment to lessen the burden of that suffering in ourselves and others, and if possible, to remove it. But then as to the suffering that remains, to be grounded in a peace in the midst of our suffering, which is the peace of God that surpasses understanding.

And so, I'd like to begin then with a poetic image; it helps me bear witness to this for myself. The poetic image is to imagine that you're on a boat, a big boat with a lot of people, and there's music playing—like a big celebration going on, and in a moment of carelessness, you fall off the back of the boat. The music is playing; no one notices that you fell off. So, you're waving your arms, yelling, screaming. No one notices and the boat goes off into the distance. You realize that you can't tread water for very long, but you can float for a long time. So, your strategy is to float out there until hopefully they realize that you're missing and come back looking for you. Now, in order to float, you have to relax because if you tighten up you sink. So, there you are, out there in the middle of the sea, like the high rolling waves of the open sea, floating and relaxing, floating and relaxing. How would you be relaxing out there? You'd be relaxing very seriously because your life would depend on relaxing. If you relax into it, it will support you. And the hours go by, and the hours go by, the rise and the fall; maybe day passes into the night, floating, relaxing, floating, relaxing.

And as you're out there in this situation, it suddenly dawns on you that it doesn't, in some strange way, it doesn't make any difference whether you drown or don't drown. That in some way, drowning or not drowning are identical because either way you're being unexplainably sustained by the intimacy of that which you cannot comprehend. [When] this realization comes to you, it's so vivid: you might burst out laughing; you might start crying. But it's just... it's too... when it's actually happening is too self-evident to doubt; it is too deep to comprehend. It's just like that. And I'm suggesting this is analogous to the man standing there with the tears coming down his face being held by one alcoholic at a time. It's one of these moments like this. And it's then you look out of the corner of your eye, and you notice the boat coming back to get you. You're so relieved; you are so relieved. When they pull you on board, you're holding them, and you're just filled with gratitude. But that night, lying in your bed, you know that really your life was saved out there in the middle of the sea in a moment beyond life and death, and you'll never be the same again; you'll never be the same again.

Jim Finley:

I'm calling that enigmatic certitude in our hearts, mystical sobriety. And I'm also calling it a kind of a faith, a kind of a radical, naked faith. This obscure certainty in our hearts of being unexplainably sustained in ways that are not dependent on the outcome of a situation. I can think of another example of this to generalize it more for all of us. Imagine that you've come to this place in your life—and I'm alluding back to again, to our first session—imagine you come to a place in your life where you're in immense darkness in which you've lost your way in your own life; you've lost your way in your own life for all kinds of complicated reasons. You thrash around and you thrash around, and then you realize that if you don't panic, if you just sit there in the dark, you begin to realize that you're not alone, that a presence has come in looking for you, or really maybe it was there all along, but you couldn't notice it till then. You discover this presence, this one with you in the darkness in which you've lost your way, that it's interiorly illuminating the interiority of your own heart. It's laying bare within you a certain kind of preciousness in your vulnerability. As you learn to follow that presence out of the darkness into the light, you're so glad you found your way back again to your own life. But you're also grateful, like the person who fell off the back of the boat, knowing that really how true it is that in having to endure the worst, you can unexpectedly come upon what's better than the best, and you cannot express your gratitude.

I'm calling this unexplainable state of amazement and gratitude, I'm calling this, mystical sobriety. So, this then is this realm here that we're attempting to put words to. So, I would say this—here's another thing I think also about this, which makes this so intimate and profound for all of us: in hearing this kind of language, there's that in us that knows this and there's that in us that doesn't know it yet; that's the thing. And I think at first, and for a long time, the part that's been awakened to it is an intimation and initial intimation; that the part that doesn't know it yet is so dense, it kind of closes off experiential access to the part that knows it because it was momentarily awakened to it.

I think this is then where the recovery community comes in or someone there because I think what happens to us is that sometimes we can realize we're in the presence of someone who's more present to us than we are, where we get the feeling that we're with someone who sees in us a value we cannot yet see. And what we do is we have faith in their faith in us; and little by little by little, this faith we have in their faith in us starts settling into us; and we start finding our own center of gravity in our own lives. And I think this is the recovering community. I think the recovering community, the sponsor, all spiritual mentoring is being in the presence of someone who mentors us. We see mirrored back in their eyes a reflection of our own true face that we're not yet able to recognize, but we sense that they do, and we follow it. So, then we say, well then, we follow the teacher, that is we follow the person, or we follow the community in whose presence we are seen in this way. So, the question is, where does the teacher take us? That's the question, and I would suggest that this brings us to the Twelve Steps, because where the teacher takes us—that is, for the one who's well-seasoned in such things—they take us to where they themselves started, and we're eventually, as we'll see, where we all start over and over and over again for all of our lives.

So, we begin then with the First Step, the First Step being: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable." So, the First Step then is admitting. I'd like to reflect on this: I would like to reflect on the transformative power of admitting. This is a thing about the recovering community in all different modes. See, if you admit, you're admitted. If you don't admit, you're not admitted. And, if you admit, you live, and if you don't admit, you might die. So, what is it that makes admitting so extremely painful, and the very thing that's so painful is the very thing that saves our lives? It would seem then that the act of

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admitting is a great koan or a great riddle in our heart worth meditating on, is this transformative point-of-entry that leads us ever deeper into the sobriety that we're exploring here together. So, I think to get at this admitting, we need to back up a little bit and to see that what's also in program—maybe through all of our lives really—is something that precedes admitting and makes admitting possible. And what precedes admitting and makes admitting possible is hitting bottom. Because, see, what makes admitting so painful, it's very painful to admit that our lives have become unmanageable because we all need a sense of self-efficacy; we all need a sense of look, I can handle this; or one way or another, I can get through this; or if I can't, there's people I can go through who can help me get through this. I can cope and I'll get through this, and I'll be the better off for it.

Where it gets really scary is where the invasive thing starts to get to the very core of ourselves, and we're really not sure anymore that we can handle it. There's a very scary and also shame-based feeling about ourselves on the loss of...it's very hard to admit to ourselves that we've lost our way in our own lives like this, and that our lives have become unmanageable. I'd also say here that unmanageable is a polite word for terrible. Unmanageable is a polite word for extremely painful. It's a polite word for just the fact that something's too sad to be true, [but] doesn't mean that it isn't true, see, and all this sadness and all this kind of scary scatteredness pertains to me. It's very...it's a very...you can understand why the denial of the alcoholic...they're not denying to be difficult, they're denying because they're trying to save their lives. And because as long as I can hold on to some semblance of at least telling myself I can make this work, I have a chance; because to admit that I don't have a chance, admitting then would be an act of despair. So, the denial is actually...we're going to look at this later when we look at character defects, on the intimacy of the denial and what happens then when we come to this act of admitting that I can't make it; I just, I cannot make it. So that if it's up to me, the act of admitting is to admit despair. That's the thing really. There's another piece of this also and it has to do with alcohol. Here we have to acknowledge, there are really some things that are specific to alcohol or mood-altering substances, prescription medications, any mood-altering substance that has its own physiology to it: it has its own power to it, and we need to acknowledge that here, but at the same time to know that that addictive process itself generalizes into ways that pertain to all of us.

Because I think what alcohol does is that.... See, here's another way that I would put it about alcohol: it's also very hard to admit that what's fueling the chaos, see, what's fueling the nightmare, what's really destroying your life, is what's getting you through your day. There is the great bind. The very thing that gets me through my day is what's destroying me. This is a very paradoxical place to find yourself. Furthermore, it's very paradoxical to know that the very thing that's getting you through your day, that is destroying you, is that you can't stop. And you know you can't stop because you tried. As a matter of fact, you've tried so many times; it's so embarrassing; maybe you don't even try anymore. You don't even try anymore because the alcoholic in you does not care about you; it does not care about you. And it's a *coup d'état*. The self-esteem of self-efficacy has been preempted by a self-destructive force; and it has carried you off; and is having its way with you; and this is really your situation, seriously.

However, there's a little piece in this that's going to be very important later: the alcoholic is someone who has discovered something that's profoundly spiritual. The alcoholic has discovered this: my problems are not my problem; my consciousness of my problem is the problem. It isn't my problem: it's the way my problem has accessed my experience of myself. So, it's my experience of my problem, my consciousness of my problem, that's the problem. Therefore, if I could alter my consciousness of the problem, no problem. This is why I say one

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way of looking at an alcoholic is that an alcoholic is a would-be mystic who wandered off into a bad neighborhood and got mugged. In other words, they were really onto something. This is the heart of mindfulness; this is the heart of metanoia; this is the heart of spiritual awakening. Something at the heart of the matter is consciousness. Sometimes I put it this way: what if you would be dropped into the middle of a desert island and you'd never see anyone again there ever for the rest of your life? One thing is for certain: you'd have problems there. How do we know that's true? Because you'd be there. Because wherever you are there are problems, and therefore, the problem is not the problem. The problem is the internalized state of my own subjectivity. I feel like I'm a walking mistake. I feel like I am the subjective reality, my own problem, and furthermore, I'm invested in the problem. I'm identified with the problem, or the problem has become identified with me, and this is my dilemma. This is really my dilemma.

Therefore, the tricky part for the alcoholic is the fact that altering your consciousness doesn't mean the things you are so painfully conscious of politely go away; by not tending to them, they continue to fester. This is why if you look at the age of the person at which they started drinking, their emotional maturity stopped about that age. They started drinking about fifteen years old. They can be thirty-five years old; they're about fifteen years old because they didn't grow by facing their problems. I would say something else, and this will be important later, is that the state of consciousness in which I believe I'm nothing but the self-that-things-happen-to, that as I am nothing but the self, conditioned by conditions, is itself an altered state of consciousness because it's not yet grounded in the love that loves me so as unexplainably precious in the midst of my difficulties. So, what we're really trying to do here is: we're coming to a painful place of admitting, and the admitting then brings us to a place in which, if this is up to me, this is not looking good. As a matter of fact, if this is up to me, I think it's despair; but the very fact that I've risked despair opens up a whole new possibility because maybe it's not up to me. Maybe there's another way.

And so, the Second Step of the Twelve Steps is: "We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." As long as you were still holding on, as long as I was still holding on to this ideology of our brokenness as having the final say in who we are, we were not capable of seeing this, because we actually had faith in our own brokenness as the power to name who we are. It's only when we came to see for ourselves the bankruptcy of that...St. John of the Cross says, he says, a person who can see a little bit will resist guidance; a person who cannot see at all will stretch forth their hands and be led to unknown places where they don't know how to go. This is really what admitting can do for us. See, admitting is poverty of spirit. Admitting is experiential humility and in that act of admitting then, it opens up this paradoxical faith; it's a faith.

This is why I think that the person on this healing journey in relationship to their Higher Power, to God as they understand God, is that the person comes to say to God: you know, I don't know who you are; I don't know who you are. But I do know who you are: you're the one who saved my life. And I don't know who I am either; but I do, I'm the one you saved. And so, there's a faith in the poignancy or the radicality that's a very painful moment. It's so true that in having to endure the worst, we can come upon what's better than the best. And we start to come upon it in the fragility of the intimacy of a faith. It's not the faith of dogmas; it's not the faith of answers. It's what Gabriel Marcel calls a primitive inner assurance that I am a presence that protects me from nothing, which is obvious because it didn't protect me from my addiction. It didn't protect me; it's not even like that. It's a presence that protects me from nothing even as it unexplainably sustains me in all things and has even brought me to this moment where I was able to recognize its presence in my life, in my broken hour, in my darkness.

Jim Finley:

And this is faith; this is faith we have come to believe. Notice however, that if the power of this destructive darkness is the impotency of our will to actualize ourselves, notice that admitting is a paradoxical empowerment. That is, paradoxically, we're empowered to admit that it's a hopeless situation, that's what we're empowered to do. It's hopeless if it's up to us, and we're empowered to admit that. Secondly, we're also empowered to believe; in other words, hope and not despair has the final say in what it means to be human: that the heart refuses to assent to despair as having the final say in what human life is all about, which is the truth of faith. It's the truth of faith.

I'd like to give another example of this. I used to give retreats in Denver, Colorado, and there was a sister there, Mary Luke Tobin, and Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, who was a friend of Thomas Merton, she was the only woman officially invited to the Second Vatican Council. She was Mother Superior of the Sisters of Loretto at the Motherhouse there in Denver. Her secretary who went with her, Jane Marie Richardson, later on became a hermit. I went out to the hermitage and visited her, and saw one of these great persons, really, a political activist, Mary Luke Tobin; and she used to bring me to her place every year to give retreats. One year, I was there giving a retreat in Denver with Mary Luke Tobin at this Thomas Merton Center for food distribution to the poor, that kind of thing. And there was liturgy there, and the priest who presided at liturgy, he was on the retreat, and he had been a missionary for many years and was sent back by his community to the United States for cancer treatment. From a medical standpoint, the treatment was not successful. So, he received permission from his superiors to go back to the village where he'd spent all these years to die, and he gave the homily. When he gave the homily—and you could tell he was ill—but in a homily, there was no sense of bitterness; there was no sense of fear; there was no sense of anything that had disturbing energy in it. He said in this homily: you know, I went to this village to bring Christ to those people—I hope I did—but I do know they brought Christ to me because in being with them, they showed me how to live, and being with them, they showed me how to die, and I'm going home. It was so moving because that's spiritual sobriety.

So, I'm not saying here at all this is the only...this comes to us in many ways: the way of the poet; the way of the artist; the way of the one who serves the poor; the one who is committed to healing; the one who gives himself over to an intimate relationship or having a child. It comes to us in many ways where we're brought to the edges of our own resources, and there, instead of despair, something breaks through in on us and saves our lives, and this is what we're talking about here, see? And so, we are now in this place: it's a quality of our lives in which we're in the mystery of admitting, and a strange power to open up a whole new possibility for us. Secondly, we're in the power of a faith that unexplainably sustains us in our inability to sustain ourselves.

The Third Step of recovery is that "We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand [Him]." And I would like to reflect now on this third phase. Imagine—here's an image I have of this—imagine you're in a burning forest. The Buddha once said, he said, the whole world is on fire, can you get out on time? And so, you're in this situation where the woods are all on fire, and in the distance, you see light through the smoke. You go running toward the light, and as you run toward the light, you run out to the edge of the forest into the bright, clear light, and here you're at the edge of a cliff; and you cry out to the Higher Power, save me; and the one whose light led you out of the fire to the edge of this cliff said, I will save you. I will save you. Jump; see, jump. In other words, the deep deliverance that we're looking for cannot occur as long as we're still dependent on still trying to make it work on our terms.

Jim Finley:

Thomas Merton once said in the monastery, he says, you know, we're always trying to strike a deal with God. He said, the deal kind of goes like this in a way: you know, Lord, this mystical union with you means the world to me. Really, I really, really want this more than I can say, under one condition: that when I cross the finish line into mystical union, my ego will remain intact, and I'll become a mystical ego, and finally get the respect I deserve. We're always striking a deal; we always want to hold on to the compromising thing because it would create [an] identity crisis if it would fall away like this. And so, the jump... See, we cannot attain it, but it attains us in our inability to attain it. I can't do this. By the way, if I could do it, it wouldn't deliver me, it would just be more of me. So, I have to surrender myself. Can I be vulnerable and safe at the same time? That's the question that we're asking here really. Is it possible to be unexplainably vulnerable and in that vulnerability to be unexplainably safe to jump?

And this is this leap; this is this leap. And by the way, I think it's the leap we don't know how to make, and we don't need to know how, we just do it. Well, another thing, we discover it's already starting to happen to us, and we don't know how, [this] is a gift—like something's happening to me and I do not live on my own terms. I do not live on my own terms. And my own brokenness has brought me to the edge of myself, and in it is a kind of a surrender that's saving my life.

Soren Kierkegaard, the father of Christian Existentialism, he had this image of what he called the leap of faith. He says, you leap; you make this leap of faith; and he says, in the free fall we're caught by Christ. Reflected in his eyes, you see your true face: there's no fear there; there is no fear there. That in this descent, actually in the free fall, you're falling into the bottomless abyss of an oceanic mercy. This welling up, sustaining you unexplainably in the free fall, which is the gift of tears, this is the gift of the great spiritual awakening. And so, this handing our life over is this deep, transformative groundwork that opens up our lives to a whole radically deeper way to live. Notice something, to the alcoholic: you're still an alcoholic. Do you notice you're still facing the unworkable marriage? Doesn't mean any of this stuff has gone away. It's just that you're being radically transformed in the midst of unresolved things, which is what makes it so intimate.

So, I shared this image in my Thomas Merton reflections. The image I give is that when I was doing my doctoral work, I studied...there was a study on anxiety levels in paratroopers, which was done for a military training. This person hooked up an instrument to these people. It had a clock in it, and it would measure changes in anxiety levels, like breathing rate, heart rate, kinetic skin response, different things. So, he or she could get correlations between changes in anxiety and what was happening. And these were the results of the test. They went. For the first-time jumpers, when the command was given to get into the plane, the anxiety went up. When the announcement was made [that] they were approaching the jump site, the anxiety got higher. When they opened the door of the plane, the anxiety got higher, and just before they jumped, acute anxiety. The old-time jumpers, those had jumped over and over and over again, the command to get into the plane, no anxiety; approaching the jump site, no anxiety; opening the plane door, no anxiety. And as they stood just ready to jump, no anxiety. But just before they hit the ground, the anxiety would go up. Why? They knew by experience you never get hurt jumping out of the plane, ever. It's the damn ground you have to watch out for. The new people, this doesn't dawn on them yet. Those who know how to jump, they go up on weekends, hold hands; they do it. Why ruin a good thing?

Jim Finley:

So, here's the question that we're raising here. What if life is a groundless jump? If life is a groundless jump, then fear would be groundless. And how do you discover life is a groundless jump? By hitting the ground over and over and over and over again. As terrible as it's been, as painful as it been, as broken as you are, there is something in you qualitatively richer than all that brokenness, or you would not be alive today. That your own presence in the midst of your pain bears witness to a presence that transcends your pain and sustains you in it unexplainably. And I think this is handing our lives over.

I was giving one of these retreats just a couple of weeks ago, and somebody on the retreat said they've been in recovery for quite a while. She said to the whole room full of people, she thought she had actually mastered the first three Steps and kind of moved on to deeper water. She said it dawned on her that she'll never master the First Step, and she said she found herself chanting the First Step over and over like a mantra, and I think that comes closer to the truth. See, we'll be on our deathbed chanting, admitting, learning to admit, and learning to hand our lives over and learning to have this deep, deep abiding faith. Gabriel Marcel says, you know we've learned to love someone when we've seen in them that which is too beautiful to die.

This is the deathless beauty of ourselves that shines bright in this mystical sobriety that we're exploring here together. So, I think really that in conclusion, I would just add this piece. See, what would it mean then to Eleventh Step these first three Steps? See, what would it mean then in prayer and meditation to increase conscious access, contact with God as we understand God? And what I would suggest to you is this: as you listen to these reflections, what is it about looking at life in this way that touches you? What is it in speaking of such things in this way that resonates with you? What is it that you sense is being alluded to in this kind of language, that's very hard to talk about? And what's it asking out of you? What's it asking out of you? And where are you at in this lifelong process of learning how to hand yourself over to this love that is unexplainably handing itself over to you as your very life? And where are you at with this really? And so, I'll end there with that thought.

Mystical Sobriety with James Finley

Dawning of a New Way to See

Jim Finley:

We're in the midst of exploring the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous as a spiritual path that has saved the lives of many men and women whose lives were being destroyed by the addictive use of alcohol and other mood-altering substances. We're here exploring this path with an emphasis toward the interior depth dimension of the recovery process. So, my hope is that those of you who are in recovery will feel that what we're sharing here helps you in your ongoing recovery process. But we're also looking at the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous as marking out a spiritual path that pertains to all of us; that we're all addicted to habits of the mind and heart that cause suffering. We all know what it is to at least have had moments where we found ourselves in a darkness, in which we had lost our way in our own lives, and how we were graced, like "Amazing grace, amazing grace, I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see." This sense of experiential salvation. I was in a place so lost I couldn't even find myself and I was delivered from that darkness into the light. So, we're meditating then on the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, where each Step is actually a very intimate, transformative moment that sheds light on the meaning of what it is to be a human being. It helps us grow in experiential self-knowledge as we move out of the darkness into the light.

We left off exploring the first three Steps, in which we saw that the act of admitting powerlessness over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable, the first Step; came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity, which is faith; and then made a decision to hand our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him—the handing over of one's life. We've been reflecting on these first three as the ongoing foundations of the transformative journey out of the darkness into the light. I'd like to move on then from those first three and to reflect here together on the Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Steps. The Fourth Step is "Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves." The Fifth Step: "Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs." The Sixth Step, "Were entirely ready to have God remove these defects of character." And Seven: "Humbly asked him to remove our shortcomings." I'd like then to reflect on these Steps.

You know I'll begin first by, again, this idea of this kind of acknowledging the depths of our capacity as human beings to be fundamentally confused. To the addict who's actively in their disease, who's actively using, to use this imagery of light and dark, to the addict, their light is their ability to have their next drink. I was talking with my father who died an alcoholic and he told me not long before his death, he said that if I knew I could never drink again, I'd have no reason to live. It's quite a thing to hear your own father say. So, their next drink is their light and to never drink again is their darkness. Now to the family and the ones who love the alcoholic, they're very concerned about the person because they see that what their loved one thinks is their light is really their darkness, and the darkness they dread is actually the light. So, the process is one of starting to come to a point of truth.

The point of truth is the hitting bottom, when we're able to see that here it's the darkness that is the darkness, see? And here, what I thought was my darkness, the light really is the light. But when I start to see it, it creates its own crisis because although I see it, there's that in me that doesn't see it yet because I'm still an addict. That is, I'm still bonded to that which is destroying me. I see that it's destroying me, but I can't liberate myself from what's destroying me. This then creates the crisis of despair if it's all up to me. But that crisis then opens up the possibility that maybe it's not all up to me: that a Power greater than myself can restore me to sanity. That is,

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there is a power that can achieve in me what I by my own power am powerless to receive. This then becomes a kind of a faith that's as serious as death: that is, one holds onto it. And it's very fragile because the density and intensity of the trauma is all too real. But this faith is very delicate. It's very, very delicate. So, one is somehow already beginning to hold fast to something subtle and delicate within one's heart, but without which there is no hope. Then one is to hand one's life over to the care of that Higher Power and to the will of that Higher Power. So, to will that, to want to hand it over, we then see in the Fourth Step what that means. For what we hand over is our lives, is we hand over our lives. So, the searching for moral inventory is: how can we learn to see the story of our lives in the light of the Higher Power that's illuminating the darkness of our heart? The root issue here is not what my father thought of me, not what my mother thought of me, was not what my spouse or what my pastor, my boss thinks of me. The real issue isn't what I think of me. It's how can I join God in knowing who God eternally knows me to be? See, how can I see my life through God's eyes so that when I see me, I can join God in who God sees when God sees me? So, the story of my life then is the story of how I was so unable to see that. Now, in this very fragile moment of my life, which is this precarious new beginning of my recovery, there's this dawning of this new way to see my life. If there's a new way to see my life, then there's a new way to live my life because I can, through the grace of my Higher Power, live my life in fidelity to this presence that found me in my brokenness and is drawing me to itself like this.

So, this is what I would like to reflect on. I would like to reflect on a spiritual worldview. See, I would like to... You know, in our society today, you know, we have a scientific worldview. We have a political worldview. We have an economic worldview. There's a worldview of different religious denominations according to their own denominational interpretations. But, what's a spiritual worldview? See, how do I see my life? What is my deepest conviction about the ultimate nature of my situation? That's what we're really asking here, see? I think then this is experiential self-knowledge. I've been given my life, and how can I understand the gift of my own life, the gift of everyone's lives around me? Here's where we start to see already that the Twelve Steps of recovery is kind of recovering from a myopic, blunted understanding into a more spacious, gracious understanding of the nature of my situation, the nature of everyone around me as the story of my life.

To get at this, I'd like to get at this poetically first. How I'd like to get at this is reflecting on a certain image of the psychologist Winnicott. He speaks of this moment of the original "alone together." What Winnicott's observation is: in these developmental stages of childhood development of their mind, he says that a newborn infant is still in a state of osmosis with its mother. That is, the infant has not yet awakened to itself as distinct from or other than its mother. And so, the mother is holding the child, the mother, the father, the parent figure, the mother is holding the child, and she's gazing into its unknowing eyes. Winnicott says there is that very first moment as she gazes into her infant's eyes, there's a very first moment the child looks back at her. Now, Winnicott says if that moment would never happen, this child could never emerge as a distinct adult. But, if it thought it had to risk its oneness with her, it couldn't risk it. It has to know that it's not going to risk its oneness with her in emerging as distinct from her.

Therefore, I would say poetically, is it possible to use this poetic language here? That when God eases us into the earthly plain, God eases us into the place on this earth that's most like paradise, which is the mother's gaze. Because when the infant awakens to itself as distinct from its mother, it awakens to itself in her gaze, in which it experiences itself as cherished by her. That it experiences her as delighting and as its own innate value like this. So, I'd actually like

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then to share this image, getting at this. You know, a newborn infant has this kind of clasping reflex, where if you put out your little finger like this, they'll hold onto your little finger. So, imagine you're holding this newborn infant. So mysterious how a human being could be so tiny. And you have your little finger out like this and they're clasping your little finger. The striking thing about this infant—this is before it awakens, this is before it awakens—is that this infant is so limited. It's completely limited. It can't feed itself. It can't roll over by itself. It can't dress itself. It's also not at all helpful. It doesn't do the chores. It doesn't chip in. It's just an amazing burden of how everyone has to tend constantly to its needs because we might say, it is the epitome of limit. It is the epitome of limit. And yet here's the insight: she's holding her little fingers out like this, the baby has her little finger with the imperial strength with which the infant clasps her extended little finger, like a king or queen holding a scepter. It all but carries her heart away. She knows that if she were to die in the act of saving the life of this infant, she would die in the truth.

Therefore, the mother experiences within herself the limitless nature of limits. That is, the mother sees in the child a value or a worth that can not be calculated. It's not the kind of value that will come later where the ego has a sense of worth or value because of attaining hard-fought goals. That's important psychologically to have that. But this is an innate value that cannot be calculated, that's innate. In other words, we might say, really it's seeing within the child that the child is worth all that God is worth. That the child is precious under her and she's smitten by the child. And I would say, too, for the mother, her capacity to see this in the child reveals her to herself as someone who's capable of seeing this. Therefore, it is a sense to be in the presence of the child is to be in the presence of God. It's not a religious experience for the child because the child hasn't yet emerged into distinct ego consciousness to have a religious experience. It is the preciousness; it is the preciousness. But, for the mother, she sees in the light of this limitless nature of its limits, the divinity of the child, which then reveals to her the divinity of herself, the divinity of all of us.

Now, let's say we lived in an ideal world and that our parents were mentally healthy, sober, sane, stable, grounded, awake, compassionate people. And we were so fortunate to be surrounded in this atmosphere of this being deeply seen in this way. So, it goes like this: you were born and your mother held you or your mother touched you, and you received at a pre-verbal level this input by the way she touched you, the way she held you, the way she looked at you, and you internalized it. You then responded back to her: you laughed or there was eye contact, whatever the response back was. Then, she responded to your response. She would laugh or she would smile, and then you would carefully take in her response to your response as a feedback loop to yourself, if this was an ideal world. We would say that a little girl cannot give herself the experience of her own preciousness: she has to see it mirrored in her parents' eyes. To the child fortunate enough to have this grounded, loving parent, she can't give herself the experience of her own preciousness, but she doesn't need to because she's hallowed in this atmospheric love that constantly mirrors back to her within herself the invincible preciousness of herself as a value that precedes and transcends attaining anything.

So too with your father. Your father touched you. Your father held you. Your father talked to you. You took that in. You responded. You responded to the response. So too, if brother and sister, school mates, teachers, boyfriends, girlfriends, all through life, were taking these internalized messages to people. Not all these messages we get from people are helpful. Not all of them are loving. Not all of them are a mirror back to us, the invincible preciousness of ourselves. There's a psychologist Harry Stack Sullivan who says, in a psychotherapy session, it looks as if the therapist and the patient are alone in the session. The therapist is sitting there on

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the chair and the patient is on the sofa. He said, but sitting there next to the patient is the patient's mother and the patient's father, their boyfriend and girlfriend, their husband or their wife, their boss, their whatever. He said, it's very crowded on that sofa. He said, it's amazing there's room for the patient on the sofa, which is why the person's in therapy. Will the real James Finley please stand up?

So, we have all internalized these introjected messages about ourselves. And so, we then say, I can speak of myself, I can speak of myself. The self of myself is the self that I observe. So, I can say, you know, I'm worried about myself, or I'm concerned about myself, or I'm proud of myself, or I'm ashamed of myself. The "my" of myself is the me that sees me. And this me that sees me has internalized these messages. And so, if it has internalized hurtful messages, I can be prejudiced against myself. I can be punitive towards myself. I have internalized within myself these messages, which then become my own messages to myself. The density and intensity of these messages eclipses or closes off experiential access to the primordial purity of the original value that cannot be measured, which is the mystery of myself created in the image and likeness of God. So, I become my own obstacle to the intimate realization of the God-given godly value of myself because I've internalized these messages.

So, it goes like this: because these messages are so hurtful, and they are hurtful, and because we're a child and we can't physically leave, we have to find a way to survive. We have to find a way to survive, and so we might say here that the story of our lives with these character defects—character defects are internalized survival strategies formed in trauma and abandonment—I then had to survive, and I had a strategy not to be annihilated by it. So, here's the litany of sorrow, which is enough to make a person drink by the way. Because my mother and father couldn't see me, I internalized their blindness towards me, and I became my own blind spot to myself because they gave me the message that I didn't matter. And because I couldn't bear the pain of it, I agreed to myself that I really don't matter. And because I accepted the fact that I didn't matter, I survived. And because I accept the fact that I don't matter, I still survive. Because I was passive, because I had no choice, I gave external compliance to avoid being attacked or abandoned. I gave external compliance to avoid being attacked or abandoned, I survived. And because I give external compliance to avoid being attacked or abandoned, I survive. Because I got angry, because I got angry and got attention through my anger, I survived. Because I get angry, I survive.

A lot of people in prison are people who are living with an internalized identity of themselves of anger as a survival mode. A father puts his little boy or a girl up into the low branches of a tree and reaches out his arms like this and smiles and says, "jump, jump." The child jumps, and the father steps aside, and the child hits the ground crying, and the father walks away laughing. And something inside the child says never again, never again. Because I withheld the core of myself from ever entrusting myself over to anybody, I survive. And because I withhold the core of myself from everybody, I survive. And so the litany goes, and so the litany goes. But here's the dirty little trick: it's true that you survive, but the you that survives is the traumatized you. This is the dirty little trick in all of this. And this you, this internalized identity formed in trauma and abandonment, you start taking it on as identity as if it has the power to name who you are, which is the shame-based identity. It's bad enough you had to go through all of this, but what's worse is you're then punitive for yourself and internalizing going through it. It creates the secrecy of a shame-based identity: one is afraid that if anyone would really see what I'm really like inside, no one would love me. Do you know why? Because I see what I'm really like and I don't love me. Do you know why? Because I've internalized the fact that my parents didn't love me.

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Now there is in each of us, there is in each of us a core, unbroken connectedness to the invincible preciousness of ourselves that's buried under the rubble of all these regrettable things. I'll share a story. There's a woman who told me that she was in therapy, and she said her parents would argue a lot violently, and they never abused her, but they would get so intensely enraged at each other, she would feel terrified. But in their rage at each other, they couldn't see what they were doing to her. They couldn't see that lost look in her face. She said that in their backyard, there was a tree in the backyard. It was in the summertime. It was night. And she was maybe four years old; she was little. Her parents were screaming at each other. She said she opened the back patio screen door, went out into the dark to that tree. She climbed up in the branches of that tree, and as she could hear her parents screaming at each other in the house. She looked up and she saw a star, saw the stars. She closed one eye and she lined up a twig with a star, and she said to God, "if you know I'm here, make that star move to this side of that twig. It will be just between us. If you know that I'm here make this star move." Then the woman said to me, she said: "the star didn't move." She said—and so it was so touching to me—she said, "but there's something about the remembrance of myself as a little girl sitting in a tree, alone in the dark, waiting for God to move a star that gives me solace."

No matter how intense the rubble of alienation is... and all the way... Every trauma survivor knows the issue isn't what was done to me, the issue is what was done to me did to me; that I've internalized it like this. No matter how deep it goes, there is within the depths of ourselves—it shines out every so often—this little glimmer of something like this. And so, it says, how do I understand then the exact nature of my wrongs? I know there are other ways to look at this, but I think this is a very helpful way to look at it. How does God see the litany of my regrets? How does God see my wayward ways? How could I join God in seeing the way God sees the story of this inventory of faltering? Because hurting people hurt people. And in my hurt, I hurt people in all different ways by withholding, by aggression, by.... It's just endless; these different ways we can act out, the things that hinder us from becoming the person deep down we really are, and we long to be. So, if we're going to make a fearless inventory, then what is a fearful inventory? The fearful inventory is that we attribute authority to all this brokenness and that's what makes it fearful.

Really, our Higher Power is our shame-based belief that our shortcomings, and faults, and brokenness have the authority to name who we are. It's really the idolatry of brokenness over the love that loves us so as invincibly precious in our brokenness. This is really the key to this whole thing. I must admit, it isn't just that I'm broken because I'm broken, but I must also admit that I believe I am what's wrong with me. See, I believe I am what's wrong with me. And in this belief about myself, which by the way I try to hide as if it's not true, and therefore, I have to hide the secret from myself, and then the drinking or the addiction, whatever it is. Here's another way of looking at it. It isn't just alcohol. Because I couldn't be nurtured as a child, what I would do, I would eat alone in a dissociative state so that I could symbolically nurture myself through food. So, because I ate dissociatively, I live. Because I eat dissociatively, I live, which are eating disorders. Because I use sexuality to somehow feel my own body or to somehow experience myself and live. So too, I still use sexuality, but it's a dissociative kind of disconnected sexuality that's not bound up. So, all these dimensions of our being can be preempted or taken hostage as internalized survival strategies. So, what we start to do is we see all this.

So, what is it that makes this seeing fearless? That's the question. Because insofar as the person is still addicted to the internalized authority of this brokenness, they can't bear it. They cannot bear it. So, here's the power of all of this then. I want to go back to the story about the person at the AA meeting who said there were tears streaming down his face as people [came] up and

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held him. It's such a powerful experience to be in the presence of someone who sees the brokenness, maybe because they live with you and it's obvious, or it's a therapist, or the friend, or at a recovery meeting, whatever. It's so powerful to be with someone who sees the brokenness, who sees through the brokenness to the invincible preciousness of yourself in the midst of your brokenness. Thomas Merton says in the spiritual order, to know is to know that we're known. To be in the presence of someone, who in the very act of risking to let them see your brokenness, this is where the deeper place opens up. That when we risk sharing what hurts the most in the presence of someone who will not invade us or abandon us, we can come upon within ourselves, the pearl of great price, the invincible preciousness of ourselves in the midst of our brokenness.

All the brokenness is still there because it needs to be dealt with; but, now what's laid bare is the invincible preciousness of myself in the midst of my brokenness, and I'm in the presence of someone who sees it. I admit it in the presence of someone. And with that person, the lover, the spouse, the therapist, the friend, the AA meeting, the caring person who sees the brokenness, sees through the brokenness to the invincible preciousness of myself as unexplainably more real than all that brokenness. And they see it. This then allows me to see it too. See, until I can start to see it too, it's really not fair. You can really violate a person by revealing a brokenness within them when they're not yet ready to bear [it]. You can destroy them with it. Why? Because they think it has authority to name who they are. It's only when they can start to see for themselves that it doesn't have the authority to see who they are, then that allows them in that grounded place of the preciousness of who they are, they can afford to join you in seeing that brokenness. It's like this.

Now in psychology, there's this psychologist, Carl Rogers. And Carl Rogers had this...it was called the Rogerian Triad. And he understood therapy to go like this. Think of it as a triangle. One point of the triangle is unconditional positive regard. The therapist sits with the person in a stance of unconditional positive regard. That is to say, no matter what you tell me, no matter what you reveal to me about yourself, it will no way diminish my sense of the dignity of who you are as a human being in my eyes. It won't, see? And so, the first step is unconditional positive regard. The next one is empathy. I am so genuinely sorry that you are having to go through this; and you sense that you're not alone in the midst of your difficulties, like Thich Nhat Hanh says. You know, I see you dear one and I'm here for you. You're seen as precious in the disclosure of your difficulties. So, you know you're not alone. And the third point of the triangle is self-congruence. The person's honest with you. So the person might say: you know, quite honestly, I'm concerned about you. I'm really concerned about you. I'm worried that such and such, and such and such. Now, he says that what starts to happen in therapy, it's like being re-parented in love, really. That through a person's unconditional positive regard for you, you can start to find your footing in an unconditional positive regard for yourself. And that unconditional positive regard for yourself in joining God in seeing who God knows you to be before the origins of the universe as invincibly precious, indestructible in God's eyes. Likewise, the empathy to know you're not alone is then you're not alone anymore either.

See, I think deep down in a way, we're all lonely for ourselves. We're lonely for ourselves. It wouldn't seem to be that way. It would seem actually that we're preoccupied with ourselves, but really we're preoccupied with our ideas about ourselves, our opinions about ourselves. We're preoccupied by what we think other people think about us. In the buzz of all of that, we can't find ourselves. But we're really lonely about how we can rest in the preciousness of ourselves resting in the preciousness of God resting in us. We long for that. In the presence of someone who is like that with us, it helps us to be that way with ourselves. And we can have

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empathy towards ourselves, to be tender-hearted toward the hurting places instead of.... When I'm with someone who will not invade me or abandon me, I can learn not to invade or abandon myself. I can have empathic bonding with the preciousness of myself in my brokenness. I can have self-congruence. That is, I can be honest and say: you know, I have some stuff I need to look at here. You know, I need to be really honest here about what's going on.

James Baldwin says nothing is solved unless it is faced. And not everything can be solved; but, nothing is solved unless it's faced. But how can we gain the courage to face it unless we're grounded in this unconditional positive regard, and so on. And so, it seems to me that the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, in these Steps, we can start to get some sense of the intimacy of it all, the wisdom of it all; and you walk your walk. In AA, they talk about slow progress marked by heavy setbacks.

And it's like you...I was giving a retreat once and the priest who gave the homily on the retreat, he says, in India, they have a butter churn, and instead of the butter churn for making butter where the paddle goes up and down like this, the paddle goes back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. You do this and it makes butter. And he says, sometimes our lives are like this. We take ten steps forward and slide back eight. We take five forward and slide back three. We take eighty forward and slide back two hundred. He said: it's discouraging until you realize you're making butter. And what you're really doing is you're growing out of the visceral, earthy, humble wisdom that you're worth saving, that there's a value to your life. And there's a qualitative wisdom in this down-to-earth, humble, honest, vulnerable way of walking your walk through your own life in a community of people in whose presence you're not alone because they're doing the same thing.

Someone once told me, they feel a lot safer at an AA meeting than they do at church because in the AA meeting everyone knows they're broken. See, not everyone at Church knows they're broken. And St. Augustine says, not everyone that God has, does the church have. Not everyone that the Church has, does God have. You can be a church-going son-of-a-bitch, really, but the power of repentance, of true repentance, the mystery of Christ consciousness is that we're invincibly precious in the midst of our fragility, not in spite of it, really. And so, it would seem that in these Steps then, to end with this thought on the... It is that we can see we're talking about a deep walk of experiential self-knowledge that transforms and changes our whole lives, in which to Eleventh Step these Steps is to have a quiet rendezvous in the presence of God in whose presence a light is shed back on our daily walk, and as a new and better way to live our lives.

Mystical Sobriety with James Finley

Further Thoughts on the Inventory

Jim Finley: I think also what helps to know that not everyone's inventory is necessarily the story of blatant abuse or trauma or whatever. Sometimes it's not that way. And sometimes, in fact, it's actually something very personal and subtle to the person. And I want to share another example of this because it's like each of us is a unique addition of the universal story of being a human being. And this story is playing itself out as my life, as your life, is endlessly varied ways. And so we're trying to see how these stories are in kind of concert with each other. So we kind of understand the ways of the human heart and learn to move with it.

I'd like to share a story too on the subtlety of this. Years ago, I first got my doctorate in clinical psychology. I started my private practice. And I was on a plane. I was going to give a retreat on Meister Eckhart and I in the aisle seat. And there was a man sitting next to me and I was taking notes on Eckhart's sermons. And my handwriting's very poor handwriting.

And so the man sitting next to me said... He looked over at my handwriting and he said, "I don't mean to interrupt," but he said, "what language is that?"

Like, he thought it was like... Something.

I said, "It's English is my handwriting."

So I told him that I was giving this retreat on Meister Eckhart. I told him I was a therapist and he told me that he was an Israeli Jew who taught physics at a major university. And he said that he was an atheist. He said he saw no evidence for the reality of anything beyond the empirical. And you know when someone questions our own worldview, something inside wants to rise up and say something like this. I didn't say anything.

Because I told him that I was a therapist, he said to me, "Do you mind if I asked you a personal question?"

I said, "No."

He said, "My wife and I, we had one daughter. And she was an extraordinary young woman, very brilliant young woman. And she was doing her doctoral work. She was killed. And my wife and I were devastated by that. And we set up a trust in her honor and perpetuity. So anyone getting a doctorate in that field could have a full scholarship. And then when that person graduates, another person can do it." And then he said to me, "Regarding the scholarship," he says, "you know it helps, but it doesn't."

It helps, but it doesn't. And we flew along there together and we had a talk about that. And at the end when a plane landed and we said goodbye to each other, he said, "Thank you."

I said, "Thank you back."

And see it helps, but it doesn't. That's inventory. And I would say the fact that it helps, but it doesn't, the intimacy of it, I would say that's God. See, I would say that God is the infinite intimacy. That it helps, but it doesn't. And therefore that's what I mean by everyone has their own story. So we're trying to trace out the trip wire in the pit of the stomach, the stumbling place and where we are with that and the unfinished business around that for us.

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Loneliness and Solitude

Jim Finley: You know, some of us, in language like this, we feel that we're very fortunate. Either in our own childhood, for whatever pain was in it, there was somebody there, who was there for us, and was very lifesaving for us. And also we may realize that today there's somebody there for us. But I think there are those of us for whom we must say that there was nobody there for us, like the little girl up in the tree asking God to move a star. And there just was nobody. Also, I think, for a number of us too, there's nobody there now. Maybe it's true that we're no longer in collusion with abusive, destructive patterns and maybe all of that, but it's so hard to find someone with whom one can be present at this level. And there can be a loneliness about that.

So these are my thoughts about this kind of loneliness. One, and this is going to be moving into the 11th step with prayer and meditation. To know that your loneliness is an echo of God's infinite loneliness for you and for all of us. To start to see loneliness as a kind of intimacy with God, as an echo of God's loneliness for us. So that by carrying that loneliness in our heart, we have some sense of being God's presence in the world. Who's lonely for the whole world, really. There's another piece of all this. Sometimes we're lonely in the sense where we're lonely for ourself, where we don't sit in the intimacy of our own story. That is, am I enough for myself, in the solitude of my own story, present to my own open heart. Think how many people live alone, either they're divorced or they're widowed, or they're just alone.

A lot of people have nobody and even more people have a lot of people, but there's nobody with whom to be like this. And so part of it, I think there's a certain loneliness that comes in living like this, but there's a certain kind of intimate quality to the loneliness. There's like the rich interiority of your own loneliness, where you're present to your own heart and you walk your walk. And then as we'll see in meditation and prayer, there's a kind of intimacy in sitting with scripture. There's an intimacy in sitting with a poet. There's an intimacy in sitting with the philosopher. There's an intimacy in the richness of your own layered intermusings and being enough for yourself. And then there's something else too.

There's a kind of keeping an open door towards the willingness to interact with somebody at this level that maybe on the surface, very kind of casual, but it's real. It's real. There's a store that I go to over here, not far from St Monica's and there's a man in the parking lot there who helps people park their cars. And he is a very gracious kind of smiling, loving ... sometimes I even go over there just so he can help me park my car. He's a very kind person. And three days ago I was walking into the store and I didn't have my cane. And he said, "Where's your cane?" I said, "I forgot it in the car." "Thanks, I'll go back and get it." That there are little moments like that, that on the surface they're just an incidental moment, but it's an authentic human encounter between two people. And if we calibrate our heart to a fine enough scale, we see that actually they go on a lot all the time.

Secondly, next point is, sometimes there is somebody there with whom we could be more open this way, but we've not yet approached them about it. And sometimes you can approach them about it and see where it goes. I see where it goes, but I do think this loneliness, is kind of the surface expression of solitude and solitude has this

interiority to it of intimacy. Thomas Burton once said at the monastery. He said, "You know, in the moment of your death, you can get all the people in the room with you that you want to." He said, "You can have them climb up in bed with you if you want, but you're dying alone." He said, "And you're that alone right now. And you'll never find the intimacy you're longing for by running from that. But by the willingness to pass through the very center of your own aloneness, it opens out upon, where we're all alone together in a kind of an intimate sense of our interconnectedness with each other." And so loneliness I think is part of what this walk is like, really.

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Inventory and Shame

Jim Finley: I want to say word about, I think for all of us too, where the concept about shame is.

See, first of all, there's kind of a healthy level of shame, in that what I did was wrong and it was hurtful, and there's a certain sense of shame which has to do with conscience. There's a kind of a toxic shame, in which the pain one feels and the wrong that was done goes so deep that the wrong thing that you did and the shame you feel around it closes off access to yourself as being precious in the midst of the shameful thing that you did.

And then that's the ideology of shame, see? Where shame actually becomes an identity. That if you could see what I'm really, really like inside, you wouldn't want to be near me. Do you know why? Because I don't want to be near me either, like this. That's why I pose and posture and I wear the mask to myself, because I carry shame. John Bradshaw, on his work on shame with trauma, has a good insight around this. He said it often happens that the perpetrator treated you in shameful ways, but they showed no shame. They showed no shame. There was no conflict over it, they showed no shame for the shameful behavior. And therefore, what happens to us who are the victims of that? We carry the shame of the perpetrator's shameful behavior as our shame, see? And that internalized shame of the perpetrator carried as ours, we don't realize it really belongs to the perpetrator.

So that ability to start to see this and to start to hand the shame back to the perpetrator is the willingness then to face one's existential isolation. That in actual fact, although I needed the mother who was safe, I didn't have one. I needed the father who was safe, I didn't have one. In actual fact, I didn't, but God was with me and for me and sustaining me in the presence of that, and I'm learning to grow into that awareness, which gives me the courage to work through this. And so, until we face our existential isolation, we cannot let ourself be befriended by the higher power, who sustains us in our solitude is precious in the world. That's a big deal about shame, really.

I'd like to end here with a question of inventory in the world. Imagine that you've joined a very special group, and this is a group of 50 people, and you've agreed to meet with one another once a week for a year, 50 weeks. And in this circle, there's anonymity, what happens in the group, stays in the group, and that one at a time, the people, the person, they decide that you take turns. One person stands up, and here's what they share. They share their healing journey. They share their story, they share the pain of their story and how their faith was a resource that gave them the strength to face what they needed to face, or they couldn't find in their faith a resource. How that was true of them, how that is true with them now, and they would just disclose to you the interior vulnerability of their own woundedness in your presence, and where they are with that.

When they're finished, no one's allowed to give any advice. No one's allowed to, but anyone who wants to can offer a supportive word, and then everyone agrees to carry that person in their heart for the week, their story. And so the next week, when everyone comes in, it's the next person. And then they share their story of these painful things that happened to them. How through the pain, they turn to their higher power, to God, through the faith with strength and resource, how they found strength in it, or they didn't find strength in it. How they find strength in it now, or they're not finding

strength in it now, and they reveal themselves to you at this level. Everyone holds it in silence, offers a supportive word. They carry the person in their heart, and for one year you go around the room this way, and then it gets to be your turn.

When you stand up and share, you're in a circle, where everyone's holding the holiness of your story in their hearts, and during the week, they carry you with them during the week. At the end of the year, what do you think the effect of that would be on the way you look out at the world and see yourself in relationship to other people? Because everyone you meet has a story like that inside. And of course, including you. Including you. I think this then brings us and kind of segues into prayer and meditation, where we go into the depths of our own story in the presence of God, that then sustains us to be present to a sometimes cruel, brutal, unfair, precious, amazing world, and how we can walk this walk and be a healing presence in the midst of a wounded world. So, I share that story.

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Illuminating Our Story

Jim Finley:

As a way to begin this session together, I'd like to share two initial thoughts, which I think are significant or important. One is a certain uneasiness about these reflections in this sense, that if you were coming to see me for psychotherapy, or let's say you were in program and you were going to see your sponsor, we're very much aware here that we're just touching on things that are always profoundly personal. But we're hopefully shedding light on certain aspects of your own experience. So you can take the things that are said here that for all kinds of reasons might not pertain to you, the way I'm expressing them, and just let them go over your shoulder. Maybe they're meant for somebody else. But what does pertain to you, or what you think might be helpful to you in your ongoing healing journey, whether you're in program, whether in recovery, or in this broader sense where we're all in this together, this process of being addicted to habits of the mind and heart that hinder us from finding the fullness and fulfillment that we long for, that way it allows each one of us to take what's there for us, and let the rest go, and move on. My second thought is this, I'd like to, again, state this poetry of this. Here I'm speaking specifically in terms of the Center for Action and Contemplation or to the contemplative tradition and on how this is headed towards a spiritual awakening. We're going to see how it ultimately has the potential, at least, to being mystical, and we're situating the healing process in the context of this poetic vision. So I'd like to do that next here, as a way to get started.

Here's the poetry of it. The poetry is that God, who is the word we use for the Infinity of Love, is infinitely pouring itself out and infinitely giving the infinity of itself away as your life, as my life. That if we think of God as generosity, that we are the generosity of God, and that God, by the generosity of God, has made your own deepest identity to be God's own deepest identity, given to you as God's gift to you. Therefore, we're established in this oneness with God as our God-given godly identity, which is the person that we are. This person that we are, this trans-subjective communion with God, is then made real by being given a nature. So we think of the person as like a thread of Infinite Love, this innermost thread of infinite love given to us by God as our own deepest, our God-given identity. Then there's a kind of an aura, like a circular aura, that surrounds this identity, and that's our human nature. So that our human nature then, is given to us by God, which is the human experience. This human experience, certainly then, this is our humanity. So, this is the thinking me and all that it thinks, the remembering me and all that it remembers, the desiring me and all that it desires, the feeling me and all that it feels, the bodily me and all the physical sensations of my bodily being. It's this humanity of myself. The dignity of my humanity, although certainly among the nobility of it, is reason, the gift of intellect, to think.

The highest nobility of our humanity is the capacity of ourselves as human beings to recognize the person that we are. That is, there are certain moments where we taste something of the God-given preciousness of ourselves, see, that there is a certain gift about being who we are. There's the miracle of being who we are, and we rest in that, or we savor that, or we know the truth of that. Then, this moment of oneness then washes back through our nature in an aura of gratitude, or an aura of amazement, or an aura of the inner certainty of our heart, knowing that it's beautiful, and it's beautiful because it's true. Then in that awareness of myself in my human nature, I then am endowed with the gift of freedom to say yes to that because love is never imposed, it's always offered. So, I freely choose to accept my God-given godly nature and my nothingness without God. In that acceptance of this God-given godly nature, there is an opening up, of giving myself in love to the Infinite Love that's giving itself to me, and in the reciprocity of this love, my destiny is fulfilled. This is my destiny.

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And on this earth, this is as in a mirror darkly; this is like an obscure certainty in our hearts, and we are to experience this in and through, mediated in our relationships with each other. So if we see this then in this way, we can then see, as we were talking about in the previous session, we can then see how in the original alone-together of the mother's gaze, we were in the mother's gaze emerging as distinct from our mother in the loving gaze of our mother, in this state of oneness in love. That oneness in love has a certain celestial quality to it. It's a certain kind of the heavenly nature of the act of being one with each other in love. So that the mother's gaze to the infant, seen spiritually, she is then a kind of an incarnate metaphor of an infinite gaze that's incarnate as the mother's gaze, and we come to know the love of God incarnate through the mother's love for us. We come to know God's love for us through our father's love for us, and so on. So if we lived in a perfect world, that if we lived in an unbroken, perfect world, we would see then how our humanity, in and through our love for and with each other, would be the way that we would come home to the realization of the preciousness of ourselves.

Internalizing that preciousness, we would see we're to go forth and share that. That everything we have, we've been given, and we've been given it to give it. And so we pass it on. We pass on this loving presence to others. The difficulty is, of course, that the human nature that's endowed with this capacity to awaken to the person, is sadly exiled from the God-given godly nature of itself to recognize this oneness, and in this state of exile, it kind of breaks off in all sorts of complicated, confusing ways. And therefore our mother, our father, in his or her own brokenness, because they were just a human being, that when we emerged in this complete vulnerability and dependence on being seen as precious, there were the ways in which we weren't seen as precious. And the very one, maybe, on whom we depended to be safe, was the very one who was incesting us, or the very one who was hitting us, or the very one who was mocking us, or the very one whatever.

So, we've gotten ourselves entangled in these internalizations of traumatizations and abandonments to form this web of confusion and fear, which is confusion for the world maybe, in our own hearts. And then, because it's so chaotic and so painful, then we try to numb it. So the addiction is an attempt actually to try to take care of ourselves by numbing the unbearable intimacy of these internalized hurts and traumatizations, which then...the plot thickens: it worsens. So, this whole process is slowly getting, admitting the complexity of all this. In the admitting the complexity of all this, recognizing that a power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity, we start to find our way back home. We know we find our way back home by handing ourselves over to the care of the Higher Power that awakened us. We start to see this in the presence of someone who can see us as invincibly precious in our brokenness: the friend, the lover, the spouse, the sponsor, the therapist, somebody in whose presence my vulnerability is seen. They see the vulnerability. They see the pain in it; they see through it. They see in me the invincible preciousness of myself that maybe I'm not yet able to see.

This way of looking at things, this kind of spiritual worldview, is that there is this kind of God-given godly nature of ourselves as our own deepest God-given godly identity. There is our human nature, endowed with the capacity to taste that, the oneness. In the tasting of the oneness then, there's the capacity to say yes to it, and then to live in fidelity to that yes. And ideally speaking, this recognition and this yes comes to us in and through our interactions with each other. So, there is this tradition then in the Christian philosophical theology that the soul has two faces. One face is the face that faces inward, which faces the all-encompassing center, which is the one life that is at once God's and our own, the oneness. The other face faces outward at the world, the surrounding world. And ideally speaking, it's by internalizing the loving interactions with the surrounding world that we're awakened to the inner world, that it's

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in our interactions in the presence of a loving person who sees the preciousness in us that we're endowed or empowered to recognize the preciousness in ourselves. But, the complexities of life is that we don't see it, and we don't see it because the people we depended on to mentor us and lead us into this awareness of the preciousness of ourselves—these very people in their own woundedness—they couldn't see themselves, so they couldn't see us either. Hurting people hurt people. And so, it's hard work being a human being. Life's complicated; and you have your story and I have mine; and we all have the kind of labyrinth in which we somehow get lost, and into which we're trying to find our way to the center, this all-encompassing center, which we're here calling the state of sobriety.

So I want to give an image of this. The playwright Eugene O'Neill has a play in which there's a scene in the play where there's a husband and wife talking, a man and woman talking, who are in this, going deeper in this intimate relationship with each other. He says to her, he says, "You know, I want to admit to you something here, that I'm wearing a mask." And she says, "Oh, take it off." He said, "Oh, no." He says, "You see, if I took off the mask and you saw my real face, you'd leave me." She says, "But don't you realize, now that I know that you're wearing a mask, if you don't take it off so I can see your face, this isn't even a real relationship." So in a moment of existential risk, he lowers the mask. She sees his face and leaves him. [He] puts the mask back on; she comes back.

Sometimes you get a feeling that there are relationships where it's a mask living with a mask. That is, it's a mask that has personified a certain stance without which, if you just saw me in the intimacy of my vulnerability, this would not work. See? And we are discontent with that. And then, we get addicted to what we're discontent with. So, this is where inventory comes in. See, in the beginning with addiction, there is a certain, very important actually, kind of psychiatry to all of this on how the brain processes mood-altering substances, and how all that works, and so on. But right at the very beginning of that chemistry is also the interpersonal biology within the person, intrapersonal and interpersonal biology of this. Once the person stabilizes that, then the recovering addict is left then to face the things that they used not to have to face. And here's where we and the recovering addict, this is where we all join each other because here, in one concert, we're all caught up in this together.

So, the story of inventory then, is the story, and in the story, then, I'd like to move beyond where we were in the last session, which has to do with character defects. It's understanding the exact nature of our wrongs as internalized survival strategies formed in trauma and abandonment. But now, I would like to talk about the story. You have your story and I have my story, and we tell ourselves our own story. So we're trying to...how do we tell our own story in the presence of God? That is, how can we understand our own lives in the presence of God who's illuminating us and setting us free from the painful distortions of our own stories? To put it another way in this, in terms of how we're coming along on this path: how has it come to pass that I have come to be the person who's able to hear these things, and to be sensitive to these things, and to be responsive to these things in a way where, maybe not all that long ago, I would not have been able to be responsive to them? And the very fact that I've arrived at a point in my journey where I can resonate with the intimacy of the things that we're alluding to here bears witness that the journey toward sobriety, we're already in the midst of it, and that God, who has begun this work in us, will bring it to completion. We're a work in process, and we're an unfolding story, trying to come into the truth of our own story in the presence of this love that was there for us in the very beginning, leading us right up to this very moment of our own story. And this is inventory, then.

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So, to get at this, I'd like to share with you...I want to say something here, too, that I think this is something where, let's say a person's in recovery and they're going to their meetings; they have a sponsor; and they're working the Steps. And as they work the Steps, they're working their inventory in the presence of their sponsor. What is that inventory? So that's what we're really doing. And what I'd like to share with you here is how I've understood doing trauma work in therapy, and how I've understood trauma work to be. Especially, I worked with people in recovery on how they see their therapy to augment or enhance the recovery work, and the intimacy of being liberated from these internalized traumatizations, coming into their own stories. To get at this, I'll share with you just the way I was sharing it with you if you were coming to see me, like this.

You and I are having a discussion about your life, and you're in the midst of unresolved things. And together, we're trying to help you be liberated from these internalized traumatizations and abandonments to which you've been mysteriously bonded. If the closest I got to having a father was the father who abused me, I will be unconsciously drawn to someone to abuse me, so I can be fathered by abuse. If the closest I got to having a mother was the mother who withheld unconditional love, I will be drawn to people who can offer no more than conditional love so I can be mothered by this abandonment of myself in my inability to be unconditionally loved. We ritualistically reenact with each other the internalized, unresolved patterns, and we're trying to get at that pattern for the healing of our inventories.

So, here's the exercise. You can either try this, literally try this, or just listen to it to gain insight from it, how it might apply to you for inventory. It's an exercise, and the exercise is that you would take a piece of paper. And usually when I work with people, I hand them a piece of paper, pencil, and invite them to draw a line across the top of the paper. And on the left side of the line, put a zero, and the person writes: my birth. And at the other end of the line, they write: twenty-five or twenty-five years of age. Some critical incidents happen beyond twenty-five, but the ones that go the deepest are the ones that get internalized in our own formative process. Then, across the top are going to be numbers that'll correspond to the age you were when different events happened. And these are the categories we're going to fill in for each of the events. And I'm going to give two examples of this for inventory, the healing of inventory.

The first thing to put in is the event. The event is a brief description of the painful event as you recall as it actually happened. The next category is your experience of the event at the time that it occurred, how you experienced it, and the meaning that it had for you when you experienced it. The next category is what price have I paid in my efforts not to feel the feelings and then to ritualistically reenact the unresolved pain of this event of my life? I don't want to go near the pain, it hurts too much, but in my avoidance of the hurting place, I ritualistically reenact it over and over again with myself and with other people. What has been that pattern of the avoidance of the hurting place, and then the ritualistic reenactment of that very thing? Next, what are the triggering events that bring out this aspect of my wounded self? A triggering event is anything in the present that in some way resembles the triggering event, even though in all other respects, it's completely different. So for example, say someone comes back from Iraq, and they're sitting at a red light and the car next to them backfires. They have a full-blown panic attack because the loud noise is a triggering event. And so, the triggering of that might be an authority figure. The triggering event might be in the presence of someone who's angry. The triggering event might be risking to be intimate with someone. But there is a triggering event that hits the tripwire inside that reactivates this unfinished piece of my own story.

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Next, the last category, what am I willing to do today to take one more step in this unresolved healing of this wounded place within myself? This is the category. And so now, I'm going to give two examples of this. And if you were doing this in your own life— of course we're all different—you would make a list of your inner...the formative factors of your present internalized story. We're going to walk through that story in the presence of each other to shed light on that story. So I want to give two examples. One example is—somebody actually shared with me—is that this little girl, when she was a little girl, she was maybe four, three or four, and it was Thanksgiving, and her grandparents were there, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters. Everyone was sitting around the Thanksgiving table and she had her back to the kitchen. The mother came out with the turkey on a silver platter and the father was on the other side of the room. The father was going to take a picture of the mother carrying the turkey—the mother, who happened, by the way, to carry a lot of anger, which she vented on this person as a little girl. This little girl was very excited. She couldn't see her mother behind her, and she was jumping up and down in her seat. In front of everybody in the whole room, the mother came out with the turkey platter, like this, and hit her on the head with it. Said, "Be quiet." The little girl slumped down in her seat. The father, who was always afraid to confront the mother, took the picture. Everyone sat around talking. The little girl just sat there with her head down. The mother sat down next to her. And the little girl said to her mother, "May I be excused?" She said, "You may." She left, went to her room, closed the door, and no one came in to check on her. The father knew he wasn't allowed to go in and check on her, and she knew that. So there's the story.

So here's the exercise. See, because in the timeless world of the unconscious, that little girl still lives in there. She still lives in there. And not only was the father afraid to see her, but she's also internalized that she's afraid to see her. So here's the exercise. Imagine that this just happened, and imagine you're alone in your room right after it happened. And now imagine that the man or woman you are today, who knows this whole story and is telling it right now as an adult, imagine that in your mind's eye you can see that little girl alone in her bedroom right after it happened. Imagine you're standing down the street where that house was. And what's important, like having a waking dream, you want to get to her and you want to get to her because you love her. That's the thing. You're walking down the street. You can see the house getting closer and closer. And then, when you were standing outside of the house, you'd pause, and you would pause and become aware of that house, that little girl in her bedroom, and knowing this incident is just the latest incident of a whole series of moments like this.

She's still a little girl. There's a lot more yet to come. She doesn't even know what they are yet, really, but you do; you do. Walk into the house. Imagine you're invisible. No one in the house can see you. You go right to her bedroom door and when you get to her bedroom door, pause and realize just who's on the other side of that door. Knock on the door out of respect for her privacy. That is, you respect her boundaries because her mother never did. Step into the room; close the door; so now the two of you are alone together. You look around and when you can see her, get a sense of where she is: maybe she's in the bed, maybe she's sitting on the floor in the corner. Imagine she looks up and recognizes you. She knows who you are. She knows you're the adult version of her. Walk over and interiorly, inside of yourself, ask if you can sit down next to her. And she says yes. She usually says yes. You sit down next to her. And now, as you sit down next to her, tell her at the feeling level how you feel about what her mother just did to her. If you want to touch her, you can touch her. If you want to stroke her hair, you want to put your hand on her shoulder, but be honest with her, be real with her on how you feel about what she just went through. See?

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This is a moment of bonding with the traumatized part of the self. The soul lingers on within yourself, and as you start to feel her pain—because the tears might come—it's letting her know she doesn't have to suffer this alone anymore because now she's suffering this with you, and she's suffering it with you because you love her. Now, the thing about this little girl or this little boy, because they hold great pain, you can't do this without your Higher Power. Because unless God gives you the strength to be there for the traumatized part of yourself, the trouble is, when you get close to her, you turn into her. That's the problem. She holds a lot of power. So through your Higher Power, you pace yourself, knowing you're empowered by the grace of God to sit with the wounded part of yourself, and you transparently reparent her in love by tenderly holding and being there for her, as precious in her woundedness. Then that bond between the two of you, it starts to heal the root of the wound between the two of you. And then you tell her this, "Now that I've found you, I'm always going to keep coming back to be here for you. I'm never going to let you go. I'm never going to let you go."

That's the bonding part, which is the grieving part, and through grieving, you can find your way back to your own life again because then you don't have to numb it; you don't have to run from it; you don't have to pretend anymore. But you can find a way to have a paced, tender, loving vulnerability for the preciousness of yourself in your woundedness. The next step. You then take her by the hand, him by the hand, and you go out looking for the mother or the father, the perpetrator. And she stands in the doorway. This is not her job. She's just a little girl, but you're the adult. You're the adult. Now, you're going to do for her what her own father would never do: you're going to confront the perpetrator. And when you see the perpetrator, maybe...let's say, let's use the Thanksgiving story. All of the company's gone, and the mother's alone in the kitchen washing the dishes. The adult you, with God's grace, confronts the perpetrator. Also, here, you're not playing God. The mother in her woundedness wounded. This is the interjected abuse. This is the internalized perpetrator of the mother who then turns and internalizes it by being punitive towards yourself. It's the internalized perpetrator within yourself. So, what you're really doing is confronting the abuse. You're not confronting the mother as a wounded human being; and you're confronting her on her behavior.

So you express anger, the God-given emotion that restores the boundary that was violated. You know, "It was wrong what you did to her. It was so wrong. It's your own little girl. Look at her. She depends on you to love her. You embarrassed her, you hurt her. She needs you. You're her mother, for God's sakes. Really." By the way, the reason the mother is probably like this is her mother and father did this to her, really. So, you confront the mother, and the little girl's watching you set the boundary with the perpetrator, something that the father would never do. You start to develop a comfort zone with your own anger, like, the truth of your own anger that sets the boundary. Like, you reclaim that right to set a boundary. Then you go back.... By the way, just beneath the anger is the pain. Just beneath the pain is the powerlessness. And when the anger comes out, just beneath it are the tears. And just beneath the tears, it goes back to this core hurting place, which is the intimacy of anger, by the way. Then, once you've confronted that anger, you've addressed it interiorly with yourself, then you go back to the little girl who just saw you do this for her. And you get down on one knee; you take her by the shoulders; you look her in the eye, and you say, "I promise you, I'm always going to do this for you. I'm always going to do this for you."

Then what you would do when you're working your inventory, you might stay with that story for quite a while. You'd go to your therapist; you'd go to the sponsor; you'd go with a friend; you journal it out. You sift it out. You'd let the story come out at the feeling level, which is coming into the sobriety of being tenderhearted and courageously present to the unresolved things in

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your own heart. Walking the walk. Then you would take your next story. You'd walk methodically and unhurriedly by being lovingly present toward the unfolding and the opening up of the hurting places, touching the hurting places with love, that the suffering might dissolve in love, and working it through little by little. As a person learns to live this way, they become ripened with sobriety. [It] takes one to know one. It takes one to know one. You start to come to experiential self-knowledge in the presence of God as a grounded, awake, compassionate human being in the midst of the world, and then you go on from there with the amends.

And this—I can't remember who wrote this book, I used to use it so much—that anger is the God-given emotion that restores the boundary that was violated. That anger is not rage; anger is not revenge; anger is not bitterness; anger is not resentment. Anger is the truth. Anger is the truth that sets the boundary. There is no healing without anger. There is healing without forgiveness. But until you have accepted and embraced your anger, prematurely forgiving out of religious motives will repress the anger, and it'll leak out sideways as addiction, as self-loathing, as unreal ways of relating to people. See? So that in the truth of the anger, that is, "This was wrong," you set the boundary to the wrong, and this is standing clear in the God-given gift of anger that sets the boundary. Richard Rohr says that the word "nice" isn't even in the Bible. Jesus never said, blessed are the nice. He was always loving, but he wasn't always nice. And so this is the truth of anger that confronts the wrong out of love and holds the boundary, like this. As you sort that out for yourself, a lot of just issues around anger, inappropriate anger, the fear of anger, you learn to come home to your own anger.

The third point is you should go back to the wounded child who just witnessed you do this for her. You get down, look her in the eye, and you promise her, "I'm always going to do this for you. I'm always going to do this for you. I will always be here for you, always. And I will never passively be in collusion with anyone who doesn't treat you the way you need to be and you deserve to be treated. And I will always be here for you. I will set the boundary." So, my sense of inventory is that in the inventory by working this out one memory at a time at the feeling level, in the presence of another person—you might not do it literally in these terms—but what you're really doing is letting another person in on the inner landscape of your own wounded heart. You're working this through with the person to come to terms with the truth of yourself as invincibly precious in your brokenness, and to be there for and with yourself in that preciousness, in your brokenness.

I'd like to give one more example of this to show you how this can really vary because a lot of times this inventory stuff, these patterns don't get worked out in trauma, don't get it worked out that way at all. Everyone has their own story. This is a person who shared that they were in a very loving family, and she was the oldest child. And when her mother had the next child, she was at the top of the stairs with a wicker basket with rags in it and a big pair of scissors, and she was making doll clothes. The mother was downstairs in the kitchen with the newborn infant, and the baby was crying. And this girl, this young girl, was going through this feeling of being dethroned by the younger sibling. So, she was going to make doll clothes to run downstairs and show her mother, to get some attention from her mother. When she stood up to run towards the stairs, she had the doll in one hand with the clothes around it and the scissors, and she tripped, and the scissors went into her groin and drew blood. When she got to the stairs, she dropped her doll and it tumbled down the stairs, and the doll's head shattered at the bottom of the stairs. She came down the stairs, holding her groin, picked up the doll with the broken head, came into the kitchen, crying. The mother, who was very stressed, got down on one knee, took her by the shoulders, and said, "Look, you're not the baby in this house anymore. He is. Your job is to help me take care of him." And the woman said, "My childhood ended that day. My

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childhood ended that day. I knew that my job was to be the adult in the house to take care [of] people." This person happened to be a very gifted person, and that person was recognized for their gifts, and that person helped a lot of people. Then she said, and she teared up, "But no one wants to hear that I even have a problem. No one even wants to hear about it." So it just isn't that the other people didn't want to hear about it, but also, in traumatic bonding, she wouldn't let herself hear about it. So by admitting this to me, she was coming out from behind the curtain and exposing the story of this very lucky person from a very wealthy, fortunate family, just gifted person, sharing a lot of gifts with a lot of people, and inside with this subtle....

They say in AA, don't compare your insides to other people's outsides. And inside we're all carrying something. We're all carrying the tripwire in the pit of our stomach where we cave in a little bit. Then there's that secret little ritual where we struck a deal with it to work it out. See? So the whole process then of inventory is really a process of how to be ruthlessly honest and endlessly tenderhearted for the place that hurts the most. Now, sometimes this tenderheartedness with the sponsor or the therapist who's hopefully then, where is that person in your life where you could be this way? Sometimes there are people that are ready to be this way and you don't give them a chance. Why? The very act of wanting to be real at this level is itself a triggering event. So you keep yourself distant from it, even though you're lonely for yourself or you're lonely for the connection because you don't know how to get close to this oneness that you long for without raising this feeling. And I think this is inventory. This is the intimacy of the inner healing of the addiction to the avoidance of the hurting place that perpetuates the suffering and the loneliness.

Here's a story that I tell on the Merton material about this. Imagine a couple that are married. And it's a good marriage. It's fine. But he's busy, she's busy, and they both get all caught up in the busyness of their lives. And he says to her, "You know, what's happening to us here? You know, it's been a long time since we've really been together, like really, really close with each other. And I'd like to get our calendars, and I'd like to mark off Saturday nights just for us." She can't believe he's saying this, and she runs and gets her calendar. And what fun it is marking off these Saturday nights. The next morning, when she wakes up, he's up already. He said, "You know, it's sunk in what I said to you last night," and says, "It's been a long time, really." And he says, "To be honest with you, I'm scared. I'm scared." And she says, relieved to hear him say this, taking his hand, "Me too." See? That's inventory. The inventory is where two people mutually come out from behind the curtain together to acknowledge the collusion they've been unconsciously imposing on each other because of not knowing how to find a place that was safe enough to walk into that place together and be present to it.

One more story. One last story. This is my Dr. Oz story. We can do Dr. Oz in here. This is my Dr. Oz story. My wife likes Dr. Oz. This is so typical of life and so on. Dr. Oz was pointing...he was talking about stress, and the point he was making is that marriage can be stressful. This was his point. So he says, "Who in the audience would like to come up and talk about stress in their marriage?" So people's hands went up. It was mainly the wives whose hands went up. And this couple came out, and she said, "Well, my..." Her husband was standing right next to her and she says, "What stresses me in the marriage is that my husband drinks milk out of the milk carton. I've asked him over and over not to do that. When we were growing up, we were never allowed to do that. I told him that I don't like that. I don't do it. And he keeps doing it." And you could tell when she was talking, you could feel emotions in her voice. He was standing right next to her, this is on national television, and while she was sharing this, he laughed. See?

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Now, I'll be a therapist for a minute. You know, one level, it's just a milk carton. You know, get over it. You're reading a lot into this. By the way, there's some truth to that. But I want to be a therapist. There's a voice inside of her that says this: "You know, I'm letting you know what you're doing, that hurts me. And instead, out of love for me of not doing that, which you easily could, not only do you keep doing it, but you're somehow pleased by the pain that it causes me. And you want me to trust you? You want me to make love to you? You want me to act like it's okay? And guess what, if I try to bring this up, you'll turn it around and make it about me. This doesn't feel very good. This doesn't feel very good. But every time I try to go there with you, this happens. We get into this thing." See? With endless variations, probably in every family, there's variations of this: between a daughter and her mother or her father; a son between his father or his mother; brother and sister; husband and wife, son or.... It gets to be multi-generational. So, we're playing out this tragic pattern of addictive woundedness woven into each other. So, what we're really looking for here is how to extricate ourselves from these patterns. That's what we're really looking for. And at first, it's an inside job. We do it within ourselves in the presence of God, and notice, it says in the presence of another person. You do it in the presence of another person who incarnates the humanity of it all. It might be the therapist. It might be the sponsor. Maybe it's the friend whom you've just never given a chance to do this. Maybe it's the intimate partner for whom you're each aware you have your own tripwires. By the way, in terms of wearing a mask, what if the person says, "You know, I'm wearing a mask." And the other person says, "I know, I know you are. But guess what? I see right through it. I see right through it. It's translucent. And I see you looking at me out through the mask, and I can tell you don't feel safe enough yet to take it off. And so, can I adjust it for you? Make it a little more comfortable? Because I want you to feel okay with me." And the other person leans forward while the partner adjusts their mask for them as a love act. And the more okay it is not to be completely open, the more open the person's becoming.

Deep intimacy is two people who have learned to be like that with each other over and over, and over and over again. They become unexplainably bonded to each other, which creates family, which creates closeness. Then we realize this doesn't work if it's just all inside us. And so then, this is where the Steps come in, where we have to then take this around, and we have to make a list of the persons that we've harmed and become willing to make amends to them all, and we make direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others. I have to incarnate all this woundedness, looking at things like this with eyes of compassion. It doesn't justify anything, but it helps to understand everything. But once I learn to understand it, see, that there is this love, there is this love that loves me through and through as unexplainably precious in my fragility. Through that love that loves me so, I'm learning to love myself as precious in my fragility, and it sinks in deeper and deeper and deeper. But now I have to live this out. I have to incarnate it by how I actually have talked to this person, how I actually treated this person, and in my own hurt, I realize in hindsight, that I hurt this person. So I have to go to them, see, and that's the amends; I want to make an amends.

So, you're sensitive, one, to know that you're not making an amends that would be harmful to them because it's not about you, really. Some amends would not be appropriate to make. You don't knock on the door and suddenly show up in a person's life out of nowhere. So, you want to be sure you do this in a way that respects their boundaries. Also, when you make your amends, they're not obligated to accept it. It's also not about you. It's just you practicing rigorous honesty, grounded in love, for authenticity in relationship. And then, like the Dr. Oz story, you need to keep it current. That is, you need to keep...there is the willingness to keep coming out from behind the curtain, to be constantly admitting something. Then pretty soon, you develop the habit of admitting as freedom; because every time you keep admitting, you rediscover the inner freedom of love all over again. And one last little piece of this, I think also, is that the way

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in which you do this, and the pace in which you do this, is not always...it's your life, really; it's the learning curve of your whole life. This is also appropriate to the situation. So for example, in the workplace, this goes on all day long. People all day long are hitting each other's tripwires. And there's a certain level of open intimacy that would not be appropriate for the context of the situation. It would not be fair to the person. It wouldn't be fair to you. There's no container for it. So, there is a way to have contextually appropriate rigorous honesty, and love, and boundary-setting, integrity, and honesty with each person. As we learn to do this, we clean house. Little by little, we clean house. In our sobriety, this deep inner peace and clarity, in the midst of life as it really is, becomes incarnate in the way we're actually present to ourselves, the way we actually treat ourselves, the way we actually treat each person that we're with.

How can I learn to live by love? So all things considered, what's the most loving thing that I can do right now for myself? What's the most loving thing I can do for this person, for this family, for this community? How can I become someone in whose presence others find it a little bit easier to come out from behind their curtain? And how can I become a leaven in the dough of a wounded world by becoming a healing presence in the midst of the world, which is this deep sobriety and this deep healing.

I want to end here, which will segue over into the Eleventh Step meditation and prayer, which leads to the spiritual awakening, which is already occurring, of course. See, the Tenth Step is, "continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it." That is, this is ongoing. The mysterious thing about this path is that the very vulnerability that in the beginning was so difficult because it was so shame-based, now, perpetual admitting becomes your way of being in the world, which is the freedom to be open toward the woundedness within yourself through which the preciousness shines out, which then allows you to be present to other people, that they might in the relationship experience that too. See? And so that will allow us then to segue into the Eleventh Step of conscious contact with God in prayer and meditation.

Mystical Sobriety with Jim Finley

Our Messy Lives as Pathway to the Divine

Jim Finley:

You know, as we move through these reflections on the Twelve Steps as a spiritual path, and moving toward our conclusion in the Eleventh Step and the Twelfth Step, I thought this would be a good time to make a few general observations about the approach we're taking here to this. I'd like to begin first with an observation from the vantage point of those of us, say, from the standpoint of the Center for Action and Contemplation or from the standpoint of a sincere desire to live a more contemplative way of life in the midst of the world. Although certain aspects of the Twelve Steps might not pertain to us in a specific sense, they might [pertain] to the addict, the person addicted to alcohol or other mood-altering substances. We can certainly see in reading the Twelve Promises and the tonal quality of the whole thing, and as it gravitates towards a spiritual awakening, that clearly this is a certain way of exploring the contemplative way of life, the interior life. I also think that for those of you who are in recovery, it helps to see how your journey in recovery opens out upon a very deep way to live a spiritual way of life. I also think that the advantage, looking at this from a language of contemplative living, is one of the advantages of the Twelve Steps, is that it grounds our contemplative living in the earthy ferment of our ordinary daily life.

Thomas Merton, in the monastery, he talked about the dangers of angelism. Angelism is the desire to become so angelic, we forget to be human. Ken Wilber talks about the danger of spiritual bypassing through spirituality of wanting to fly over the messy details of our day-by-day lives. The contemplative way of life and deep meditation is so like this: it grounds us in the concreteness of the gift and miracle of our daily lives as we are. In that sense I think it's very helpful. Also, I think this can help us in our understanding of contemplative living as we were reflecting on an inventory, a fearless inventory, and the precise nature of character defects. It can help us to see that these patterns in our hearts toward anger, resentment, irrational fears, jealousy, duplicity, avoidance of intimacy, exploitation, et cetera, that these are unfinished aspects of our journeys toward wholeness, and by carefully sitting with these patterns, they can become our teachers.

That is, the mystery, really, is that by sitting very deeply in the wounded places in a loving way, we discover that the wounded places are the places that God's mercy flows into our lives, and by experiencing the tenderness of God, or the mercy of God, and the intimacy of how these patterns were formed. "Judge not, and you shall not be judged," Jesus says. So how can we then have this experiential wisdom of experiential self-knowledge, of walking our walk in this incarnational groundedness in the concreteness of ourselves? This intimate self-knowledge of God sustaining us in our fragility then gives us the gift of empathy because by learning to see ourselves in this way, we can learn to see that everybody is a unique version of this, and it helps make community possible. I think it's also true that as we go through all of this here together and start looking at this, that really it's love that is the dynamic energy of these unfoldings, that God is love. The more we open our hearts to the vulnerability of ourselves, the more we discover the invincible preciousness of ourselves in our vulnerability, and that God's love meets us there and sustains us there. So, you know, there's this song, Johnny Cash, "I keep a close watch on this heart of mine, I keep my eyes wide open all the time." And, it's kind of like that in a way. And what I think really what it is, is I keep a close watch on this heart of mine because I'm learning how closely God watches over my heart and how mysteriously God has led me right up to this very moment in my life. We learn it in the messy details of walking the walk, and in this process, learning to be patient, learning to be kind, learning to be vulnerable, learning to be open, and any...all these...anything that makes any sense.

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So then, when we look at it in this way, then we can see that the Twelve Steps are transformative moments, not just to illumine the path, but are critical, transformative moments where the path gets deeper and wider, and evermore inclusive as we go through the Twelve Steps in our lives. This paradoxical way of understanding, that the ragged edges of our hearts are the configurations of the grace that sustains and transforms us, that kind of intimacy of all of this. To me, then, it lends itself to a spiritual awakening as a kind of wisdom. And so to share this with you, you know, our Center for Action and Contemplation is recording this in this chapel here at St. Monica's over a three-day period. This is the last day. So, last night I woke up at two in the morning with a great insight. I stood there in the kitchen in the dark, and with my little iPhone light, I wrote out the insight on spiritual wisdom. So, I'll share it with you. And sometimes this goes great when I do this, so we'll just roll with it and see what happens. It's a way of putting words to this in a way. It seems to me that when you speak of having had a spiritual awakening, that the spiritual awakening can be understood in terms of wisdom. And wisdom can be understood in terms of seeing things through God's eyes.

And I'd like to share this with you—like how to put words to this wisdom, which is really the wisdom of deep sobriety—that the sober person is the clear-minded person, who experientially sees the ultimate nature of our situation and then lives by it. So, I would put it this way: that to see life as it is, as it really is, is to see the interconnected nature of everything. This interconnectedness is an interconnectedness that we realize within ourselves. It's like an intrapersonal interconnectedness, and I learn a certain kind of familiarity with myself, on the inner unfoldings of my mind, my imagination, my memory, my bodily sensations, my perceptions. It's a day-by-day, experiential understanding of the inner workings of the enigmatic intimacy of myself, whereas I'm learning to live with the intimate gift and riddle of myself, and the interconnectedness of all of it as a unity. Then I see that this interconnected sense with myself, —this intrapersonal interconnectedness or inner unity of myself with my own life, my own body, my own mind—subsists in an interpersonal unity. This is the original alone together, see; so that who I am within myself subsists in who we are in our relationships with each other. That we're woven into each other in a fabric of interconnectedness.

You know, once I saw, I got to see an exhibit somewhere; I forget where it was. And it was a loom, a big, old, very old loom in this museum. And on a loom, you know, there are the threads that are fastened to the loom lengthwise like this; and it's the warp and the woof. I think the ones that are fastened to the loom are the warp; I might have it turned around. So the person using the loom, then every other thread of the warp, like this, and they run the woof through it on a spindle, and then they reverse the sequence and they run it back the other way. So you have the warp and the woof, the warp and the woof, the warp and the woof, and it makes fabric. So we might say then, the warp is our interconnectedness with ourselves and the woof is our interconnectedness with ourselves woven into our interconnectedness with each other, which forms the fabric of community or of our lives with each other. The warp and the woof of our oneness with ourselves and with each other are woven into the fabric of the earth that sustains us all, every breath we take. We are, in a sense, the universe conscious of itself, that our bodies embody us in the concreteness of the material world. And so, we're in our intrapersonal lives or interpersonal lives woven into the fabric of the earth in interconnectedness. And, this intrapersonal/interpersonal interconnectedness and oneness with the earth are then woven into God's interconnectedness with us.

Here's the spirituality of all of this, really, in terms of the Higher Power or what our understanding is of God, is that God is reality itself. Beginning-less, boundaryless, endless abyss of reality itself, I am who am. I am who am. God does not exist. God is the word that we use for

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the infinity of existence itself. See? And God, who is reality itself, is perpetually emptying itself, and pouring itself out, and giving itself away as the very reality of ourselves, the very reality of others, the very reality of all things. So that God's oneness with me is me. See? God's oneness with us is us. That if we think of creation as the thing of the fullness of reality is love, that if God would cease loving us into the present moment at the count of three, at the present moment, our chairs would be empty, we'd vanish because we're nothing. We're absolutely nothing separate and apart from the generosity of God, pouring itself out and giving itself away as the gift and the miracle of our very lives. This is the God-given godly nature of every breath and heartbeat. It's the divinity of ourselves. Brother Sun and Sister Moon, we're all siblings of the infinite. We are the generosity of God, and God is pouring herself out, pouring himself out, so that God's oneness with us is us, in our very nothingness without God, which is the great paradox of this. This generosity of God, this pouring itself out, is the reality of ourselves, others, and all things.

We might say then, this is our deepest identity, what Thomas Merton called the True Self. And this is our ultimate identity as the primacy of love and God's personal creation of identity. And then God endows this person, echoing back to what we were reflecting on earlier, with a nature. So if we think of the person as this thread of infinite generosity, as our deepest identity, that God's...the deepest depths of the depths of God is by the generosity of God, the deepest depths of me. Then God endows this person that I am as a *capax Dei*. It's a capacity to realize this. God endows this capacity with a nature, which is my human nature. So my human nature is kind of an aura, that surrounds this invisible thread of oneness. And so this is the thinking me and all that it thinks, the remembering me and all that it remembers, the feeling me and all that it feels, my humanity. It's the concrete humanity of myself, endowed with not just the gift of reason, but endowed with the gift of recognizing the oneness.

And so there are certain moments we realize this oneness. There are certain moments in the midst of nature, like lying awake at night listening to the rain, or giving ourselves over to the smell of a blood-red rose. There's a certain moment in oneness with the beloved where two people in love give themselves to each other. And in that oneness, neither one can find the place where one stops and the other begins. It comes in holding a newborn infant, or being at the death bed of a dying loved one. It comes to us in the pause between two lines of a poem. It comes to us in a prayerful reading of Scripture. It comes to us in our, sometimes our most unguarded hour, the view out our own kitchen window. But there are moments where we unexplainably are unable, we realize that we and God are, in some sense, unable to tell ourselves apart from each other. That somehow it's God's non-distinction from me that is the very reality of me. And in these moments of blessedness, that self...in the moment it's actually happening, whether it's very intense or very subtle, it's self-evident; it's too self-evident to doubt. It is too deep to comprehend.

Thomas Merton once said there are certain things in life we simply have to accept as real or we go crazy inside. And this is...we go crazy inside if we don't; I will not break faith with my awakened heart. I will not play the cynic, that there is this oneness, like this. And in these moments, we realize, like, what a fool I am to worry so, the way I sometimes do. We realize how everything's unexplainably more than okay, like this. And we know that really, really every moment's just like this, really. And then we start to see that the essence of suffering is that we're exiled; we're experientially exiled from this one thing alone that's always happening. That is, if every moment is the generosity of God, the arising of suffering is the arising of this very nature that's endowed with the capacity to realize this and say yes to it, is the nature that has wandered off, and become exiled from the God-given divinity of itself. In splitting itself off from

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its divinity, it tries to set up shop on its own, and the imagined separateness with which it tries to work things out on its own terms. This fundamentally illusory sense of identity creates anxiety; and the anxiety creates clinging; and the clinging creates suffering; and the suffering creates chaos. The chaos creates the dilemma of the human situation. And it isn't just then that addiction forms to numb this, which is true by the way, the momentary gratification doesn't gratify, because it momentarily takes the edge off, the ragged edges of things. But then I realize that I'm addicted to the patterns of my estrangement, which are the character defects we were reflecting on yesterday. And they're kind of a pseudo-identity, a kind of shame-based pseudo-identity that I try to work out, and sort out, and so on.

So it would seem to me then, that what we're trying to do here, really, through the Twelve Steps, is we're trying to sift all this out. We're trying to sift all this out, not by avoiding it, but with God's grace to walk through it by first of all admitting it. See? Admitting it. And this is why the Twelve Steps will never let us down. Whenever we feel we're confused, whenever we feel we've lost our way, we can find our way back home again through the Twelve Steps. By the way, when we feel we've lost our way, we can begin by admitting we've lost our way; you're off to a good start. See, because that's experiential self-knowledge, see, I'm right here, don't know where I am, see, but here I am. And step by step by step, we learn to stabilize in how God so mysteriously guides us through this constant willingness to let go of and to die to, and pass beyond these internalized ideologies, where anything less or other than love has the authority to name who we are. This is our walk, it seems to me. I think this is...to me, it seems is a very helpful way to put this, actually.

So, I think then this then leads us to the Eleventh Step to my mind. Before we were talking about these internalized patterns, so we said from the moment we were born, our mother looked at us, touched us, held us. We responded; she responded to our response; and our father did that, and our brothers, our sisters. So, we are this internalized set, like this. And the thing about these internalized patterns, these interjected, formative factors of our sense of self, is that some of them are very helpful, actually. And some of them aren't helpful at all. They aren't helpful at all. So if we had a parent who in some way couldn't see us, we somehow internalize the parent's inability to see us, and we become our own blind spot to ourselves. If we were taught somehow that somehow we didn't count, we internalized some core, deep feeling that I don't count, that I don't matter, and so on. Or, I matter if I can live up to an expectation. "Am I holy yet, am I holy yet, how's this?" So it isn't just that some are helpful and some aren't helpful at all, but the point about all these patterns, is that they're all finite, is the thing. So the power of prayer and meditation, Eleventh Step: "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood him, praying only for knowledge of his will for us, and the power to carry that out."

So the power of prayer and meditation is that it isn't just...see, the issue isn't just who my father thought I was or who my mother thought I was that I've internalized. The issue isn't really who I think I am. The issue is really: can I join God in who God eternally knows me to be? This is prayer. That in prayer and meditation, then, we go to our Higher Power and we sit in the presence of the Higher Power. Sit in the presence of the Higher Power, that the presence of the Higher Power, my presence itself in my mind and heart, and the Higher Power presencing itself in our minds and hearts then washes back over our whole lives, that it washes back over the gift and the depth of admitting the gift in the depth of this kind of trust that I'm being unexplainably sustained. This kind of trust I can hand myself over to this benevolent wisdom that's guiding me, and so on, and so on. So that's what I'd like to focus on here then, right here, is this prayer; let's see, the Eleventh Step. And I'd like to do this in two phases, which is how it usually works in real

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life. I'd like to look at it first in a traditional Christian language; however, this is in all traditions because it's ingrained in our humanity. I'd like to look at this in terms of *Lectio Divina*, discursive meditation and prayer. Then in our next reflection, we can then see how all this shimmers and shines with mystical implications, where this becomes a non-dual and a unitive state of consciousness. And so *Lectio Divina*. I, in my book *Christian Meditation*, I have a chapter, "A Ladder to Heaven," which is a commentary on one of the great Christian classic works in the Christian mystical tradition, called *A Ladder of Monks*, by a medieval Carthusian hermit, Guigo II. It has become a classic language in the Christian tradition of understanding this, as grace states of consciousness.

So it goes this way, that we go to our daily.... See the question is, I go to my daily prayer and meditation, but what do I do when I get there? That's the question. There's daily prayer and meditation, so I'm sitting for my daily prayer and meditation, so what are some practical guidelines in how to sit in prayer and meditation with God? And this gives us a good place to start that we can all start from and grow from for the rest of our lives, really. *Lectio Divina*, spiritual reading, is sustained receptivity to a beauty not yet thought about. That is, we hear words, and in the hearing of the words, the words resonate within us as immediately recognized as beautiful. And in our hearts, we know they're beautiful because they're true. So I'd like to do this out loud with you. I'd like to demonstrate this, and this is a passage in Thomas Merton's writings. It's one of those, I share it a lot in my talks, and sometimes you see it on little holy cards and so on. It's in Merton's book, *Thoughts in Solitude*. So I'm going to read it first as *Lectio*. By the way then, but see the *Lectio* might be, would preeminently be Scripture; it could be any spiritual teacher; it could be a certain poet. It could be any words which go right to your heart in the cadences of which you recognize the voice of God. I would say that's really the thing. Really, that in these words, in the inner richness of these words, I sense the cadences were the rhythms of God's voice speaking to me in these words.

Once I was giving a retreat somewhere, and we were having a little...before the retreat at this Catholic retreat house, they had a little wine and cheese social, which is very Catholic. And as I was sitting there in the library where this social was, I looked down where my chair was. Everyone was sitting there eating their cheese and so on. And there was the Big Book of AA in Braille. I thought, boy, there's a walk, to be a blind alcoholic. I know, really? I wonder what you learn to see when you're a blind alcoholic, really? And so the Big Book is *Lectio*. To read it, not as...it's not information, but it's the language of transformation. That as you read it, this pertains to me, this pertains to me, and this is God's presence in my life, speaking to me in these words, as in Scripture, in all of it.

So, I'd like to read you these; Thomas Merton's a spiritual teacher, this passage. Then we'll walk through it together.

Merton writes: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end, nor do I really know myself. And the fact that I think I'm following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does, in fact, please you, and I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, I will trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

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That's beautiful. That's beautiful. And our heart in reading it knows it's beautiful because it's true. And in it then, we can experience the voice of the Higher Power, the voice of God, speaking directly to us in these words. And so the first stance then, the first rung on the ladder to heaven, is a graced state of consciousness, of *Lectio* consciousness. And *Lectio* consciousness is sustained receptivity to a beauty not yet thought about. T.S. Eliot says in *Four Quartets*, you know, "To hope too soon is to hope for the wrong thing. To think too soon is to think the wrong thing." We're very quick to move in with our opinion about it. And it's better to humbly hold opinion in abeyance, and let the beauty of what's washing over us sink into us, so that we can sit with it. And this, this is the deep listening of *Lectio* consciousness, *Lectio Divina: meditatio*, discursive meditation, using thoughts and images. *Meditatio* is then engaging in a dialogue with God who just spoke to us in the *Lectio*.

Teresa of Ávila, how, when she describes this in *The Interior Castle*, she says when we sit like this in prayer with the Scriptures open, whatever we're using for our *Lectio*, she said, God speaks to us in the *Lectio*. And then in the *meditatio*, in the meditation, she said in effect, God is saying, "Now I spoke to you, you talk to me." She says, when we start to talk to God, which means we tell God what we sensed or resonated with, or what touched us, or led us to wonder about what God said to us. And she says, when you talk to God, she says in *The Interior Castle*, she says, sisters, we should be very careful who, we should be very aware of who we're talking to. You know, you're talking to the Creator of the universe. You're talking to the one who gives you your next heartbeat, unless you'd be presumptuous. You're talking to the one without whom you would be nothing, absolutely nothing, the one who's loving you into this present moment. She says when you talk to God, imagine you lean in real, real close, and you're whispering in God's ear. She says, in effect, she says, I'll paraphrase, and know that God's infinitely interested in everything you say. Why? Why? Because God's in love with you, is why.

And God says, I just love it when you talk to me like this; we should do this more often, really, each unto each, heart unto heart. So you pour out your heart, you just...it's the language of devotional sincerity. So the things that you say are actually the sharings of yourself. Those are words that change life, is when the person's speaking is actually in the words, it's not just words, they're sharing themselves with you. What they're really doing is sharing with you, what God has achieved in them, and they're sharing it with you, which is how Merton can talk to us like this, really. We're all empowered to talk like this, when we're vulnerable and sincere and speak from our hearts. Friends know all about this, lovers know all about this. The mother sitting with her child during a goodnight story knows all about this. We all know the power of a word to express the very presence of the person who's speaking the word. And we are this way with God in the *meditatio*, each onto each. This is really the power of thought to be illumined by what's granted to it in silence. This is not the language that explains anything because it's not explainable. This is not the language that defines anything because it's not definable. It's the intimate immediacy of the undefinable, gift and miracle of our very lives being poured out and given to us by this infinite love into the present moment.

This is this living word, this *meditatio*. In the *meditatio* then, it's endlessly evocative, really. And so what you do, you might read it two or three times, and then you would walk through it, you might journal it out, you might spend several months with this, really. "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going." And I might say, for example, I'll *meditatio* out loud with you. You know, in a way I know where I'm going: after this talk, I'm going to lunch and then I'm going home, I think. But you know what? When I look back over my shoulder, like back in the day, I thought I had all this figured out. And guess what? I didn't. Because the unforeseeable-ness of my life hasn't just brought me to things I didn't expect, but it has transformed my very

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consciousness in ways I didn't expect. And in that deep sense, I don't know where I'm going. Also, by the way, even as I sit here, I draw closer and closer to my death. God says to Mechthild of Magdeburg, "Do not fear your death for when that moment comes I will draw in my breath and your soul will come to me like a needle to a magnet." That's where I'm going, I'm going to you, Lord. And I can't comprehend it. See? And so, there's a certain kind of graced unforeseeability to everything like this: I don't know for certain where all this will end; I don't even know who I am. So that's why I say, the alcoholic, the recovering person says to God, "I don't know who you are, but I do know who you are, you're the one who saved my life. And I don't know who I am, I'm the one you saved."

So there's this deeper way to understand what it means to understand, that goes deeper than explanations, and words, and definitions, and all the rest of it. But I do believe, and, by the very fact I think I'm doing your will doesn't mean I'm doing so because I'm subject to self-deception. The true self-knowledge is the humility of knowing that I'm subject to self-deception, and which has me always being open to any input I can get that might help me. It's non-ideological in its stance. But I believe, therefore, the fact I think I'm doing your will doesn't mean I am, but I do believe that the desire to please you does, in fact, please you. See? So that you say to me, you know what, I know you think you're doing my will, and I appreciate that. But guess what? You're not. Really, because there are broken off places within your heart that are blocking your view of what's really going on here. But the sincerity of your desire to do my will pleases me. And therefore, as misguided as you might be, I will, through the midst of all this, lead you unexplainably to myself, I will. Therefore—I love this saying—if I therefore have this desire, which is really, admitting, it's really the depth of admitting, and opening myself to this faith in you to guide me, "I know that if I have this desire, you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it." That's a great saying, see? I may...I am on the right road, and I might know nothing about the right road that I'm on. I have an idea of the road I think I'm on. I have my opinions about it, but really, really, really, you strip away the projections and the delusions underneath it all. You...I'm tethered to you in your drawing me fast to yourself. "And therefore I will trust you always, though I may seem to be lost in the shadow of death."

By the way, I think I'd also suggest that this is what I mean by God is the presence that protects us from nothing, even as God unexplainably sustains us in all things, that sometimes it isn't just in the past, there have been moments where we have felt lost in the shadow of death. But there's more ahead. There is more ahead. See? Whatever that might be, and however lost I might be, I trust that although I am lost, that you never lose me, and you're leading me unexplainably to yourself, and therefore I will not fear. There you see the certainty of grace grounded in the grace of God. It's not a certainty that's grounded in his own ability that he's figured anything out, but it is a certainty that he's being unexplainably led by God in all his wayward ways. So you read this text then, and this is the *meditatio*; you journal it out. It's endlessly evocative. Every sentence has endless....

It's an intimate conversation with an intimate person over an unhurried meal. We're in the exchange back and forth, back and forth. By the time the dinner is over, you're qualitatively together at a deeper place, through all of this, and this is what the *meditatio* is like. And then the prayer is from the heart, "Help me with this, see, help me with this. I can't do this without you." Really. Then what happens? This is the rendezvous. Then this rendezvous washes back over all Twelve Steps, washes back over all the previous steps. And it goes right back then to the intimate immediacy of admitting, but it hallows it with the depth dimension. So the admitting through the years gets richer and richer and richer because it's transformed in the depth dimension of prayer and meditation that grounds us in the presence of God. Therefore, I think

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what actually happens little by little, is then we cultivate the habit of *Lectio* consciousness. That is, because in a way, we could say then that every time anyone says anything to us, Lord, it's you talking to me. See? Can I recognize your presence in the presence of this person? Can I have *Lectio* consciousness in the slant of light across the floor, or a moment of silence. It's this vulnerable, open attentiveness. And can my *meditatio* be a kind of thinking that doesn't complicate things with chatter, but the kind of thinking that invites a loving reflection on what's most real and matters most in every interaction in my life? Can I live with this purity of this desire, this prayer? Help me to live this way always. So I'll end here then, with this reflection on the Eleventh Step.

Mystical Sobriety with James Finley

Mystical Becoming

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Well, for this, our last session here with each other, I'd like to continue on with the Eleventh Step, but I'd like to then show what it might possibly mean to speak of meditation and prayer becoming mystical, which would then lead to an understanding of mystical sobriety. Then, I would like to talk about where do we go from here. That is, insofar as we've resonated with this approach to life, what speaks to us, or we feel called to live this way, what are ways that we can continue on this journey? And [that would] be a good, I think open-ended kind of way to end; it just leads then into the rest of our lives.

So first of all, mystical sobriety. I'd like to, first of all, try to...I want to share with you a couple of poetic images to serve as metaphors where we can start to understand what the word mystical might mean. What is mystical experience, and then what is a mystical way of life? Then to see how prayer and meditation grounds us in that, which in turn grounds us in this mystical sobriety as a habitual state of consciousness. The first example I'd like to use is from married love. This is very relevant, too, in the Christian tradition because a number of the Christian mystics are in this nuptial tradition, that is they really see married love as the primary metaphor that best demonstrates what this sense of mystical union with God is. So, I'll start with that kind of imagery.

Imagine a husband and wife talking, and they're having the kind of conversation that every married couple has regularly,, where they're going over the weekly chores about groceries, and getting the car fixed, and dental appointments, so on. And as this is winding down, she says to him, she says, you know, I had a thought lately about us and I don't know if this is a good time or not to bring it up. But if it is, I'd like to share it with you. He says, no, it's good. What is it? And she says, well, you know, really, until we met, I didn't even know a love like this existed really. And he says me either. And she says, it's gotten so deep. He says, it has gotten deep. And she says, I suppose if we keep going this way, it'll keep getting deeper. And he says, I suppose it will get deeper. And then she says, I wonder if we'll ever get to a depth of love so deep, there'll be no deeper depth of love to get to beyond the depth of love we've gotten to. In other words, what she's really asking is if there's an end to love. And in asking the question, her heart already knows the answer. They'll never get to it, that they'll never get to it. That love never ends.

So in the poetic imagery of this then, there is an awareness that they have with each other that they're descending together into a bottomless abyss of love in this descent. The next awareness might not come to them, or if it does, it might come to them in a very subtle way. But then there's the awareness that the bottomless abyss of love into which they're making their descent is welling up and infinitely giving infinity of itself away, in and as the intimate immediacy of this moment with each other. And insofar as they sense that with each other, we might say then they're momentary mystics. Now, insofar as they're touched by that as a moment of mystical unitive consciousness, like the divinity of the concrete immediacy of the gift of their love for one another, they can't live there. They can't live there because why? Because they have to do the chores, that's why.

But, what if they would discover in this way that if everything they do with each other, they would do in this underlying attitude of their love for each other? Then this path of ordinariness can, little by little, become infused with this underlying, unexplainable sense of this bottomless depth dimension of the precious giftedness of all the simple rituals that they do with and for one another every day. So, this is why we can say then how true it is that when we don't know

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someone very well, how easy it is to say a lot about them, because opinions are easy, based on our observations and whatever. But, when we've loved someone very deeply for a long, long time, we hardly know what to say, and our heart breaks when we try; and we know no matter what we say, it wouldn't be what we know because we really can't say it. We also know, in being so blessed, how fortunate we are to have been rendered into a wholeness by having our heart broken open in this way.

I'm suggesting that's an intimation of the mystical. It's this unexplainable realization that God is the infinity of the concrete immediacy of life, and that life is the concrete immediacy of God, which is the divinity of the ordinariness of things, of which love is the fullness. So, it would seem to me then, that every transformative path where a person goes very, very deeply in a way that transforms them, in a way that blesses many people, that these are modalities of this border crossing. See, so Rilke, in speaking of being a poet, in "Letters to a Young Poet," this person writes to Rilke, who was a well-known poet at this point, and sends him some of his poetry. He says, would you please read my poetry and let me know if they're any good? And Rilke writes back and says: you're looking outward. He said, you must stop doing that. He said, you must ask yourself in the stillest hour of your darkest night, must I write poetry? If the answer is a clear and simple yes, you must build your whole life in fidelity to that inner necessity of your heart. For such a person, for the poet, there is this border crossing where it gets so deep; you get so deep; and the depth is a bottomless abyss. The bottomless abyss wells up and gives itself to the poet.

Martin Heidegger says the vocation of the poet is to evoke the holy. Martin... Meister Eckhart has this lovely image. He's trying to express this mystical consciousness and he uses the example of music. I'll apply it to my own experience that I had, when my wife...when we first moved out here and we went to hear Isaac Perlman play at the Hollywood Bowl, I think it was. It was an outdoor place. It was lovely and in that setting where you're hearing, going to a classical concert to hear a master musician. So, imagine you arrive there, and you're sitting down, and you're looking around to see if there's anyone there you recognize, and you hope you remember where you parked your car. And so your mind is caught up in the multiplicity of things. Then Perlman comes out and starts to play. Eckhart invites us to think of: what if we realize that the musician is playing with such ecstatic surrender to the beauty of the music, the music isn't coming from the musician, but through the musician? What if you're so moved that you're listening resonates with the purity of the musician's playing so that the receptive openness to the beauty resonates with the receptive beauty that flows through the musician? He said, there is a point in which it's no longer true that the soloist is on one side playing and you're on the other side listening. There's only the one event of the song that enraptures us, and where the soloist and the listener mutually disappear in the enraptured beauty of the music is a mystical experience. And so, life is filled with these moments. These will be modalities of being transformed in this unitive mystery.

Now we come closer to our reflections here when we realize that suffering itself can become such a modality. It isn't as if it's just love and poetry in the earth. And these are all modalities of liberation from the tyranny of suffering. But suffering itself can be an arena that liberates us from the tyranny of suffering. So in the Gospels, the miracle stories of Jesus, Jesus spends whole nights in prayer. And he comes out walking the earth, looking for people, and really, he's looking for suffering. When the word got out, the suffering started coming to him. My daughter died. I can't see. I'm a leper. I'm a prostitute. I can't walk, whatever. Jesus would respond to the suffering, but always what happened, he would respond to the suffering in this very dramatic way, which he said is a sign of faith. But, the essence of the moment was that he knew that the

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core of their suffering wasn't that they couldn't walk, or they couldn't see, whatever. The essence of their suffering is that they thought they were what was wrong with them. They thought their suffering had the authority to name who they are. And reflected in his eyes, they saw their true faces before they were born, hidden with Christ in God, before the origins of the universe. They saw the face of the self that they... God never, never, never, never, never, never does not know who we are. And in the eternality of God knowing who we are, which is the birthless beauty of ourselves, that self [that] God forever knows us to be, is a self that will never, never, never, never die.

So Marcel says, "We know we've learned to love someone when we've seen in them that which is too beautiful to die." They see reflected in his eyes the deathless beauty of themselves, and that's experiential salvation. So in a moment of suffering then, I was mysteriously liberated from the tyranny of suffering over my heart, which is the transformative power of suffering.

Now if we take all of this then, and go back to the very first reflection about the alcoholic at the veteran's hospital and being asked, what do you love the most The moment he said alcohol, they all stood up and gave him a standing ovation, and in silence they came up and held him as the tears were coming down his face. It was so deep. It was so deep. And it was a descent into a bottomless abyss of infinite tender mercy that was welling up and giving itself to him in that moment. Matter of fact, we might say it was in that moment transforming him into itself, so that his presence was the presence of God's tender mercy in the world, which is what so moved everybody in the room. This granting of this taste of unitive consciousness, this alcoholic, though, can't live there. So the Steps then are the steps of being interiorly healed from all that hinders him from habitually living there. And as he walks these steps—which is kind of like dying to, or passing beyond, or liberating ourselves from all these hindrances to anything less or other than love as having the authority to name who we are—this person on this path grounds himself, grounds himself, grounds herself in a daily practice.

The daily practice is this rendezvous, this grounding place that assumes the stance that offers the least resistance to be overtaken by what we cannot attain. This is where we left off last time then with *Lectio Divina*, a discursive meditation and prayer. So, as a hallowed, a sustained rendezvous of an ever-deeper listening, an ever-deeper loving exchange, an ever-deeper desire, and so on. Then that rendezvous then washes back over every little moment of everyday life. So, by constantly being faithful to the practice, the fidelity to the practice keeps washing over and deepening the path of day-by-day living and it goes like that.

Now, at what point then does it become meaningful to speak of mystical sobriety, honoring this mystical lineage consciousness? Sometimes the Christian...the great classical texts of the mystic teachers of the tradition, they say that sometimes what happens is that it's something that starts to happen to us when we're simply sitting and praying in this way. So, for example, St. Teresa of Ávila in *The Interior Castle*, she says, you're praying in this way: there's the *Lectio* and the *meditatio*; you're leaning and whispering in God's ear; there is a deepening of this desire, and so on. And then she talks about in the fourth mansion, she talks about the prayer of quiet. She says, right while you're praying in this way, she says you're interiorly drawn to not move. You're interiorly drawn; most people are drawn to close their eyes. She said you're inclined to not ask for anything. You're inclined not to say anything. And in that quiet, in that inner quiet, she says you begin to realize that the descent into God's love is welling up and transforming you into itself. At the point at which this happens, she says, for example, she talks about these beautiful things that happened in the subtlety of this moment. She says, imagine a basin filling with water. And she says the basin fills up, fills up then it starts to overflow. She says, but what if

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there was a basin that as it filled up, it never overflowed because it kept expanding to the proportions of the water flowing into it. You realize that's what's happening to your heart.

So, you're sitting there like this, and in this devotional sincerity in the quietness of it all, there's this subtle expansiveness of your heart into the boundaryless proportions of the love that's flowing into it. St. John of the Cross speaks in similar terms. When St. John of the Cross says you're praying in this way, you're doing your *Lectio*, your *meditatio*, your prayer, you're using it as a grounding place in your daily life. And then he speaks of it as a dark night, a passage through a dark night. And he says, while you're sitting there, you're no longer able to feel the consoling sense of God's oneness with you in prayer. In this kind of powerlessness to experience, God's oneness with you in prayer, you begin to realize that God's weaning you off your dependency on finite ways of experiencing God. So that by being weaned off our finite ways of experiencing the infinite, God might grant us an infinite experience of the infinite, which he describes in terms of mystical marriage; we're being married to God.

So, for any of us, I think, we can... Thomas Merton said there are many...there are people who are called to live this. There are people who are living this and they don't know it because there's no one to bear witness to them. Also, because it tends to be very subtle, it tends to be very, very subtle and delicate. It's not always subtle. Sometimes it can be very intense because he is very, very subtle. We have to habituate ourselves to this delicacy of this mysterious state where we and God can no longer tell each other apart. There's this divinity that's beyond words, beyond thought, beyond.... It's momentarily resting in God resting in us as a foretaste of heaven, really: the divinization of the self through love. Then that can then wash back over the Twelve Steps until little by little by little, you begin to realize that every moment of your life is like that. There are also some mystic teachers who say there are certain methods that you can use to invite this nondual state, where at least insofar as you discern your call to it, there are certain methods that can cultivate being stabilized in receptivity to it. So, for example, centering prayer, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, he says, you sit in this stance of this attentiveness, and in this attentiveness, you take a word, and you use the word to anchor your heart in the sustained receptivity to this oneness that you're powerless to attain by your own effort. In fidelity to the word, the word anchoring you in this receptivity, it's a stance that offers the least resistance to be overtaken by the oneness. The Jesus prayer in *The Way of a Pilgrim*—Jesus mercy, Jesus mercy, Jesus mercy—uses the repetition of the words, Jesus mercy, to ground ourselves in this awareness. I should say also, we should know that in the contemplative traditions of the world's great religions, these are lineages of these practices. So deep Buddhist practice, Zen practice—to do sitting practice; or Vipassana practice; yoga, not just Hatha yoga of the body, but Raja yoga; Bhakti yoga; Namaste, Namaste, like I am that. Where deep Torah study opens out upon the Kabbalah, and so on; Sufi, Rumi, Hafiz and, Sufi practices. So these mystical lineages are in concert with these mystical lineages of these world traditions.

So, I would now like to share with you an image of this because sometimes a metaphor can capture the sense of it. Then I'd like to share with you a way that this helped me to practice it. Here's the image. Imagine a couple. They're married. They love each other very, very much. And then she has to go away for a long time, a long time. They talk about how hard it is going to be, to be away from each other for so long. So every week they faithfully write a love letter to each other. And so the big play, the big moment of the week is waiting for the love letter to arrive. Well, as time goes by, unexpectedly she's given a chance to come home and visit, and she doesn't tell him, she doesn't tell him. She's so excited about this, and when she pulls up in the car, she parks down the street a little bit in the car, and looks at the house. She knows he's in there. She sees the mailman delivering her love letter, and she waits and she sees the door

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open, and she sees her husband going through the mail and getting out the love letter. She gives him time to sit there and open the love letter. When he opens the love letter and reads it, out of his love for her, everything she says goes right to his heart and that's his *Lectio*, see. So the scripture is a love letter from God written straight to our heart: that's the *Lectio*. Then she says something that sets in motion an inner reverie of images, which is his *meditatio*. This is a loving exchange with her in the inner landscapes where their souls intertwine with each other. This *meditatio* gives rise to desire for union, to be united with her. In that prayer, which is a desire of his heart for union, she, the one who wrote the letter, unexpectedly walks into the room. He looks up at her saying nothing. That's contemplation. Contemplation or mystical union is a sudden, unexpected manifestation of the one who wrote the love letter, and in the wordless gaze in their oneness with each other is a foretaste of heaven.

So this is I think what we're alluding to here that can happen to us in the simplicity of prayer and the sincerity of prayer and meditation that can transform our whole lives. So, I'd like to share with you then a way that's helped me to do this. I think really it's a discernment thing. I think we have to just stay very open and...it's like best fit. You just get acclimated, whatever. What I always tell people, whatever helps, do it; what doesn't help, don't do it. And what helps is what's most natural to the inclinations of your heart that take you to the deeper place. So the guidelines for the practices are these. These are old Uncle Jim's guidelines for mystical union through prayer. To sit still and sit straight, remind yourself in the presence of God all about you and within you, closer to you than you are to yourself. And sitting there, you're in a renewed awareness of God's presence in your life; let your sole intention be to deepen your awareness of and surrender to that oneness. With that underlying intention become aware of your breathing. So when you inhale, become aware that you're inhaling, and as you exhale, become aware of your exhaling, and take a few moments to settle into the deepening awareness of the rhythm of your breathing. Like, where would you be without your breathing? This sustains us all, really.

So when you sit there as you inhale, you listen to God's silent "I love you," giving herself away or pouring out the infinity of herself into you as your very life, as the concrete immediacy of this breath of your life, the divinity of the breath of life. And then as you exhale, as you exhale in a silent "I love you," exhale yourself in love to the love that with the next inhalation is going to exhale itself into you. So that in the reciprocity of love, destiny is fulfilled. So it's, I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I have to say this too: I think in a way we have to be called to do it. You know, it isn't like, oh, I tried that once for four minutes, nothing happened. I think we have to be interiorly drawn toward resting in the stance that offers the least resistance, as if we're called to do it, like our own heart prompts us to do it, and to sit like that with all our heart—I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you. Also notice that at certain times, the words will fall away. The words will fall away and there will just be this silence of a oneness and love beyond words. Then it'll start to dissipate. You'll get distracted and then you renew it again. I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you. And you sit this way and you settle into it. You settle into it. And as you sit that way, you'll notice things will arise within you.

So, for example, in the unguarded vulnerability of the practice, you may realize that you're sad about something, and maybe you're sad about something that's going on in your life, or maybe you're sad about something that's going on in the life of someone you love and care about very much. In realizing the sadness, as you inhale, inhale God loving you through and through, and through and through, sadness and all, finding no hindrance in your sadness and being completely given away as your life. When you exhale your I love you, give yourself in love, sadness and all to the love that gives itself to you, sadness and all. You sit there a little longer, and maybe you're confused about something, something big going on in your life of uncertain

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outcome. You don't know exactly how to sort it all out. Then when you inhale, inhale God loving you through and through, and through and through confusion and all, finding no hindrance in your confusion to completely give itself away as your life. When you exhale, exhale yourself, confusion and all, to the love that loves you, confusion and all. So with being stuck, so with being ashamed, so with being half-hearted, so with being distracted, so in being in physical pain, so in being delighted, so in being ecstatic, so in being insightful. So in being whatever, whatever, whatever, whatever. And in this way, little by little, you can start to discover immediately for yourself the insubstantiality of love to have the authority to name who you are, that love transcends all things, permeates all things as the substance of all things. Not as some poetic statement, but you know it with the clarity with which you see the palms of your own hands, and see an unexplainable, incarnate immediacy of the generosity of God giving itself away as your life.

Then this unexplainable oneness realized in prayer begins to show up and habituate itself unexpectedly through all kinds of moments through the day. And it starts to show up as the abyss-like nature of your admitting, the abyss-like nature of your surrender, the abyss-like nature of your half-heartedness, the abyss-like nature of your dot, dot, dot. You fill in the blank. You have your life; I have mine. Therefore, I think coming to this habituated state is what I'm calling mystical sobriety. At least I would put it this way, the way I'm talking so far: we're at the cusp of it. We're at the cusp of it. We're at the precipice of the mystical dimensions. This is what it means to be truly sober, to be very, very sober. The sobriety then is the peace of God that surpasses understanding, and to see then that the understanding washes back over everything.

You know, why is it that people who've loved each other for a long, long time, why is it that they never tire of reminding each other [of] the first time they saw each other? Or they never tire of sharing the first moment they realized they were falling in love with each other? Is it not because unbeknownst to them, love was already taking good care of them? Was it not because in all their folly, like clumsy awkwardness of finding their way, they were already being guided in a way that they didn't understand? So, this is why then this image of waiting at the ocean's edge, ankle deep. It's true if you're wading ankle deep, you're just ankle deep, but it's also true that you're in the ocean. It's also true if you just keep going, it'll get plenty deep soon enough. And that's true, that's true of sobriety. That's true with practice. That's true with anything that makes any sense. But what if the ocean and its hidden center is infinitely deep? And what if the ocean infinitely deep is infinitely giving the infinity of itself away in and as each incremental degree of entrance into it? That's the mystical consciousness of the beginner.

Let's say there's a room of people at a recovery meeting. And let's say someone walks into the meeting for the first time drunk. Everyone in the room knows that that person is already in water way over their head. The very first time that person stands up with their voice shaking and says, my name is, I'm an alcoholic, everybody knows they're in water way over their head. It's infinite; it's infinite; it's infinite. I think then this gives us a certain kind of...that's the peace that surpasses understanding really. It's the abyss-like plenitude of the simplest of things giving itself away moment by moment by moment in the miracle of our lives.

Now, I'd like to close here by sharing some thoughts about where we go from here. You know, first of all, insofar as these reflections have resonated with you at all, it means, of course, the journey is already underway because we only recognize what we know. The very fact [that] you recognize it or resonate with it, it's already turning you into itself. So this is inventory. See? How has it come to pass that you have come to be the person who is able to recognize, resonate with, identify with, long to be more one with these matters? Is it not because you've been

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strangely guided and led along this mysterious journey of your life, and that God has begun this work and [will] also bring it to completion? So, we're talking then about how do I continue to deepen my surrender to a transformative journey already begun? I would suggest to you three classic ways that are just inscribed in consciousness itself: to practice your practice and practice it, then find your teaching and follow it, and to find your community and enter it. A practice is any act faithfully entered into with all your heart that takes you to the deeper place. Ida Roshi says if you're faithful to your practice, your practice will be faithful to you. There is fidelity to the grounding place. I don't know why it is, but when I give myself over to this act—unguarded vulnerability in the presence of the beloved; the long, slow walk to no place in particular; being up at night in the dark; attending the earth; helping people—whenever I give myself to this creative endeavor, it transforms me. It's through practice then that practice becomes habituated until little by little by little, all life becomes practice.

Secondly, find your teaching and enter it. A teaching is any word that bears witness to the overflowing fullness of these things. And you recognize in it the resonances of this richness, like this overflowing presence of what cannot be explained. And then secondly, not all mystic teachings do this, but then sometimes they offer trustworthy guidance and how to follow it. The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous is such guidance. So what you do is, Zen Master Dōgen says find that person whose words awaken your heart with the desire for the great way, then forget everything else. That person is your teacher. Thomas Merton once said, there are certain writers that ring your bell. How did that person know how to say that? So, you look for your teacher; you look for the one. Your heart recognizes in the cadences where the intimations of everything they say alludes to it, but there's no closure in it in thought. And then, bearing witness to it, they offer trustworthy guidance in following the path along which you can become ever more deeply embedded into it. Little by little by little then, you discover that all life is your teacher.

Every given moment of our lives, we're being taught perfectly by God and it opens out upon our lives. We're the student of God, teaching us through the mystery of our own lives, and to find your community and enter it. Your unexplainable oneness with God, giving itself to you, giving yourself to God is your community. Your community is just one other person in whose presence you know you're not alone on this path. Sometimes this oneness, by the way, with this person, it might be somebody you live with, lucky you; it might be somebody who lives far off. It might be somebody who's been dead for centuries, but there's a certain, a deathless oneness with the one in whose presence you are one like this that the heart cannot explain. Then you realize that there are gatherings of people that when they gather together, they bear witness to each other. One Zen master once said, "It's very hard to keep one log burning alone in a fireplace. You get four or five together, they keep it going." And when people...where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. In the communal recognition of each other, the community is contemplative church or sangha or ashram: it's a contemplative community.

And that community then, like a leaven in the dough, is to realize then the whole world becomes our community. That the whole world lays its claim on our heart. That we're to go forth and be this way in the world. And I think therefore, how this ends for all of us is that: take me, break me, make me your own. We really don't know what it is that love will ask of us next. But, we asked to live in such a way that love might use us for its own purposes in the world. And maybe in the end that's a deep way of understanding what the meaning of all life is about. That if I can come to that in my own way, if I can come to that and if I can help other people come to that by being the kind of person in whose presence they're more able to recognize this in

Jim Finley:

themselves, so they can pass on the contagious energy of this mystical sobriety or this healing. I think this is the way. So I think then the Twelfth Step, "Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs." That's really true within the recovery community, but here we're seeing how that community overflows its banks, not just for the person in recovery that it overflows into everyone they meet, but how these teachings are so profound, and so rewarding, and life-changing for all of us.

Mystical Sobriety with James Finley

Honoring Ourselves, the Process, and What is Before Us

Jim Finley

Yes, in terms of, where do we go from here in understanding the path? Today, in Ken Wilber's contributions to all of this on spiral dynamics and so forth, but where I first picked up the sense of this spiraling is that Jacques Maritain, the Thomistic philosopher, he says that when we're in a logical effort to find the answer to a question, the mind moves in a horizontal line. So, one plus one plus one equals, like this. He said, but with a mystery, it's not like that. He said with a mystery, it's like there's a kind of a descent. How I put it is that in this kind of quietness or in this stillness, the level of consciousness at which you began to sit in the practice or to sit with the person you're trying to help, whatever it is, the level of consciousness at which you began the moment, that level of consciousness begins to yield and give way to a qualitatively deeper, more interior consciousness that grants access to previously unrecognized, qualitatively deeper dimensions of the moment in which you're sitting, and you realize that God's the abyss-like nature of that moment. See?

And so, when I say, I love you, I love you, I love you or Jesus mercy, Jesus mercy, what it is really, is it circles around; it circles around; it circles around. And every time...that's why repetition is not redundancy. If a husband says to his wife, "I love you." She doesn't say, "You know, you said that yesterday, you said it the day before that, you're so redundant, really. I'd like to hear something new out of you, really." Well, she doesn't say, "I didn't know that. You have any books on that?" Why do they say it over and over? They don't say it to communicate information, but they say it because every time they say it, it evokes a possibility of a deepening transformation, of a deepening surrender to the love for which there are no explanations, really. And so, how does this all work? I'll tell you where it all works. It all circles back around to admitting. Because let's admit it, see? Each given moment, there are stumbling places in our hearts. Each given moment, each one of us is up against the intimate riddles that we're being asked to face every day of our lives, in our families, in our bodies, in our lives, whatever. And how can I in this perpetual renewal of admitting...? Every moment, life begins all over again, amen. And so, it starts spiraling down, spiraling down, spiraling down, and what goes around, comes around. And I think that's also a very rich way to understand how we're moving along here like this.

Mystical Sobriety with James Finley

Further Reflection on Feeling Frozen

Jim: When I would assign this in therapy, I'd give them a piece of paper and I'll say, "We'll do it together, write it out and there's a thing, we'll do this writing." So I say, Why don't you choose something on the list and then we practice together on how to work with it. Like how to get here and touch it and prayer, and then touch it and then prayer.

They'll come in next week and they'll say, "I wasn't able to find the time to do it." So I say, "That's okay, we'll just continue on and give it another try if you're so inclined." Next person will come in, "I had it, I got started and I lost it." And what it really is, it's coded language it's for I'm not ready yet. And if you push it too hard. You're traumatizing them and you're disrespecting them because they need to listen.

So doing the question would be this. Even to get started, I feel frozen. Like I'm shut down. So what is it that makes this process approaching my own suffering so hard for me to approach? If I could name it or the part of me that's afraid to approach, if you could talk, what would it say? And there's a lot of truth in that, probably.

So even reflecting on why you're not quite ready to do it is already to start to do it. Cause you're processing your own fear of doing it and you're in the midst of it already. That you're in it in a way that's possible for you and that's what counts.

Mystical Sobriety with James Finley

Further Reflection on Feeling Flooded

Jim: First of all, I want to share something here I think is key. What happens is we catch ourselves in the act of being punitive towards the self that needs to be loved the most. The person who just slipped one more time, that in us. Say, "Well, still can't get past the habit that compromises our happiness with other people." And we're tempted to do one or two things. We're either attempt to attack it, like, "I hate that about myself." Or we abandon it by addictively numbing it: turn the TV up a little louder, eat another cookie, whatever.

So what we're trying to learn is to be like ruthlessly honest and endlessly tenderhearted toward the hurting place. And when we get flooded or overwhelmed, and if we do this work, sometimes we will, depends on our history. Sometimes more than others. We know that the very first thing in getting overwhelmed is we got too close.

So you notice, we can withstand anything as long as the center holds. What gets real, real scary is when the invasive voice, the energies, reaches the core of ourselves and we start to disappear from ourselves. That's trauma. It's trauma. And so we know we got too close, so what we do is we back away. We back away, just pull away distract ourselves, get away from it, whatever.

And then what we do is we try to reflect on what happened. And usually, what we notice is that the flooding didn't come out of nowhere. There were little hints it was on its way. You could tell it was on... Like epileptics sometimes will have an aura. They could tell before they have a seizure. And you can learn, "I need to be present to what hurts in a loving way, because that's where the change happens." But I can tell the signs within me, I'm getting too close and I learn to back away.

And so those times you get flooded, they tend to happen less frequently. You tend to recover sooner and you tend to discover it's part of the path, really. So those are some things that I find helpful, helps people.

Mystical Sobriety with James Finley

Further Reflections on Courage

Paul: I do have a couple questions that just came up for me. There were points that you had made in your teaching that I wondered about just putting a spotlight on them, because there were concerns or questions that had come up from students in the past. The first one, I love the way you talked about how we have to go through our hurting places to get to that union with ourself and with our higher power. You spoke about the courage it takes to touch or approach those hurting places. I just wanted to invite you to reflect on that again. If that courage is not present, what I heard you say was, to go back to that ground, go back to that daily rendezvous as a place for that love to well up. Is there more that you could say to that, or am I catching the right drift?

Jim: No, that's right. That's true. Here's some insights that help me with it, to see it as it applies to therapy and trauma. Say we go through a traumatizing event, and even though the traumatizing event might be long past, we discover that it got inside of us. It got inside of us, like it lingers in hidden places in our body. A triggering event is anything in the present that reminds us of that past trauma. If it lines up, the autonomic nervous system will reexperience the initial trauma, a flashback, panic, hyperventilating, fear, whatever it is, because these internalized hurting places hold power. They have an energy.

Now, the thing is, the infinite love of God is infinitely greater than that hurt. But it's subtle, it's very, very subtle. So, I say God is a presence that protects us from nothing, even as God unexplainably sustains us in all things. So, we have to drop down into this infinitely more real, but endlessly subtle presence of God, to draw up the strength, to give us direction, focus, and courage to touch the hurting place.

Really, I think we try to help the hurting place understand that it really does see something that was unfair. It does see something that is still very painful. It's not to romanticize it at all. It isn't. But the thing is that there's something in them that's infinitely more real than the hurting place. Because the traumatized person, we tend to think we are what's wrong with us, which is the shame that comes with trauma.

So, how to help the hurting place to see that they're God's beloved, that they're infinitely precious in God's eyes? How can they learn to join God in seeing themselves through God's eyes as being infinitely precious, and unexplainably whole in their brokenness? I think, to see that, you can call it experiential salvation. Sometimes it comes as the gift of tears, it comes as a release. But through the acceptance of the painful place is liberation from it.

Another way that I put it is that when we learn to risk sharing what hurts the most in the presence of someone who will not invade us or abandon us, we can learn not to invade or abandon ourself, but deeper down is what Jesus called the pearl of great price. In the very acceptance of the very thing that was so painfully overwhelming, we discover the pearl of great price, that we're infinitely loved and sustained, unexplainably forever. To drop down into that place is freedom from the tyranny of suffering in the midst of suffering, and trusting that when the moment of our death comes, it'll be freedom from the tyranny of death in the midst of death. I think that's why I call it mystical sobriety.

See, it's an unexplainable kind of sobriety. I think those are some thoughts that help me with it.

Paul: Thank you, Jim. Part of what I hear you saying in that, too, is one of the enduring understandings from this course. It's not necessarily getting the inventories done. All those can be great tools and assets along the way, but your invitation through this course is into an entire pathway grounded in this sense of what you're inviting students into. That the practices, the inventories along the way are tools in aiding that, but they are not the central focus. It's not about getting things done.

Jim: Yes, right, exactly. I'll put it another way, too. Let's say instead of as a course like this, let's say you were coming to me for therapy, trauma therapy. You come in each week and we do the work together. At the heart of our time together, would me asking you, "How you doing? Where you at today?" You can tell I'm asking because I really care, and because I really care, it helps you to pause and join in the caring about yourself.

A lot of the inner work, when you're doing this on your own, you have to be that way with yourself. It's always stopping to pause, to check in with ourself, with this gentle-hearted, courageous concern, and listening to what we find when we do that. Otherwise, we turn it into a project, we turn it into a checklist, and we go right past ourself. That's an important piece of this, I think really.

Another piece, I think, also, is who are the people in your life? Maybe you can't talk with them like this. Maybe you can, that'd be great. But who are the people in your life that you know with all their limitations, really know you, love you and care about you in the midst of all your limitations? It's the authenticity of interaction with the gift of the friend, the gift of the person who's there, and life can be extremely helpful.

Mystical Sobriety with James Finley

Guidelines for Interconnected Family Inventory

Jim Finley:

Oh, greetings, everybody. A word of explanation, while we're together here. As we've been putting together the Mystical Sobriety course, and we came to that session on the storyline, realizing after the fact that when I used the storyline in my psychotherapy practice, and also in spiritual direction, I expanded it out to demonstrate the way we're all interiorly interconnected with each other, as our story, as our shared story. And so we decided therefore it would be helpful to insert or to add this updated expanded version of the storyline exercise. And then at the end, Paul and I may have a little dialogue out of the hope we bring out, clarify a few points. So I'll just share this with you.

Let's say first that, of course, you would engage in all of this in a way that's meaningful to you personally. For some of you just listening to it, you'll find it insightful. Others actually do the storyline exercise as a meditative practice, almost like an 11 step in itself. It may further enrich this deepened sense of mystical sobriety and spiritual groundedness and wholeness in your life. And so this is a further refinement of that same thing. I found some people find this very helpful to do what I'm about to suggest now on an ongoing basis. It's a kind of an on-going meditative process in experiential self-knowledge. And so I offer for you to use at your own discretion and how you think it would be best for you.

So let's say first, to begin with the story, with your storyline. You're going through your storyline and you fill in the different categories, and what these traumas and hurts and losses were, how they become internalized in you and the ways they get triggered, come out. But then also what are the graces in your life, and the graces that have helped you to heal this, which is sobriety, deepening levels of not just sobriety from mood-altering substances, but the sobriety of being freed from addictive patterns of hurtful behavior, internalized survival patterns that were formed in trauma and abandonment. Of how you can recognize those, discern those, and with God's grace work through those as your own learning path through life.

And so now we're going to expand that to more of an interconnected enrichment of that vision. So what you would do is you would have your storyline, say, in front of you on a piece of paper, and you would put it off to the side. And what you're going to do on the next sheet of paper. And typically I use a paper sideways. For some reason, I find it more conducive to the thing. And what you would do is you would do your father's storyline, and this would be based on what your father told you, what you remember about your father, about family lore, what other people in the family have told you. It would also be based on looking back and what it felt like growing up being in the presence of your father, and older and wise as you look back to understand his life better.

So you would draw the storyline and you would put the ages he was when he experienced traumas or struggles or trials, whatever, how they became internalized in him as certain patterns or attitudes, or the ways he treated himself, the way he treated you, the way he treated your mother, the way he

treated your siblings. You know, dear your old dad going through, but also what were the graces in dad? What were his strong points, and what were the ways and to what extent did he face and work through and overcome, and mature his shortcomings as he got older. And to what extent that he didn't. So you would fill in those categories like this.

And what you would do is you would take your storyline and then take his storyline, and you would take his storyline and you would put it off. So here's yours like this. Then you would put his off to the side, up above it. And then you would line up the things about him in terms of how he internalized his trauma, how it affected how he treated himself, how he treated you. You would scotch tape the two together. You would draw lines to show that what aspects of your father touched you at those points as you got older going through, and what were the healing or the lack of healing of those?

I think I might have mentioned this in the series. I can't remember. This model of psychology, where the person says that when a person's in therapy, it looks as if the psychotherapist and the client in therapy are alone in the room. The person in therapy is sitting on the sofa. The therapist is sitting there. But the person said that interiorly sitting there next to the person in therapy, their mother is there, and their father, and their brothers and sisters and boyfriends and girlfriends. "In fact," he said, "it's very crowded on the sofa actually." He said, "It's amazing there's room for the person on the sofa." He said, "That's why they're in therapy."

So what we're trying to do is to bring into conscious awareness these interjected presences and patterns that affect how we in turn feel about ourself, act towards ourself, and how we treat other people, both the internalized wounded things to face and learn to become sober, with God's grace to grow out of, to be a more clear- minded, engaged, compassionate, vulnerable, honest human being in relationship with others and so on.

And so you would look at that interrelatedness with your father like this, and then you would take another sheet of paper and you would make one for your mother. You can see how this could go on for quite a while, the kind of a slow-paced, meditative, quiet way of reflecting. Sometimes some people find it helpful to get pictures of their father or their mother, put the pictures out in front of them, because it's a felt sense. It's almost like what it was to be in their presence and how it affected you.

You'd fill in your mother's and then you would put hers off to the side with yours. Here's your dad's up here. Here is yours. Here you'd Scotch tape it. You'd line it up with yours and you would draw lines of critical incidents in your mother's, how she acted towards you as acting out the way she felt about herself and the effect that had on you. And you would see what that looked like and how it's evolved, or didn't evolve, or hasn't evolved and so on.

And then you would make another one, and you would do one lined up together of your father and your mother. And growing up, what did it feel like? Not just what did it feel like in being in their presence, but what did it feel like being in the presence of how they treated each other? Were they warm and close and forgiving? Was there a lot of anger or distance or dishonesty? And how do you think that affected you growing up, just observing that? Like how safe it felt in the house, what your whole sense of family was, how their dynamics with each other heightened or lessened their ability to see you, so you knew you had a mother and dad who saw you and loved you because they saw and love themselves.

And then you would do another one of siblings, and up to 25 years old, brother, sister, boyfriend, girlfriend. So as you lay this out, as you lay all this out, you start to meditate on this interconnectedness of your unfolding story interwoven with their unfolding story. And the last part of it is this.

Assuming too, we're working toward ever increasing states of sobriety, not just mood altering substance, but discerning survival patterns formed in trauma and abandonment, and how we're traumatically bonded to those patterns, and how through our higher power, through God's grace, we can be freed up and healed from those by it. You would ask yourself in your own past, what effect do you think you've had on the lives of others? Just like your mother and your father, they had an effect on how you felt about yourself. And so it's a multi-generational passing on both in terms of woundedness, where looking back you realize you could have been more kind, or more patient, or more honest, or more direct. And why it was hard to be more direct. Why didn't you feel safe? Maybe you didn't even know you were allowed to, whatever.

And where have you grown in your internalized growth within yourself, as an internalized growth where the people in your life are grateful your presence in their life, because through your presence, they feel more seen, they feel more loved, they feel more understood. They feel more with you in a genuine way.

And lastly, I suggest think of the camera panning back and think of the interconnectedness of the community, the interconnectedness of the social order around prejudice, around indifference, around hostility, around kindness, and in terms of how we see the world. God so loved the world he sent his only begotten son in this world that we all live in together. And how are we in the world in such a way that our presence makes the world a better place to be? This sobriety. And then to see it's mystical depths. Is it the way you're in the world is manifesting the way God is so unexplainably one with you as an infinitely, precious, loved person in your wayward ways, and being a merciful presence in the world. So that's the practice. That's the exercise.

Paul:

Thank you, Jim, so much that really helps I think prepare all of us to engage in this from, not just our story, but how does it overlap as you said, with the

interconnectedness of the entirety of our lineage and those that have deeply touched us.

I have just a few questions I think might help myself and anyone else who wants to engage in this practice. The first question is this. I think you touched on this, but I was wondering if you'd go unpack it a little bit more. How do you suggest that we approach this? Because I was thinking to myself, there's a bit of like you're charting. You're a cartographer. You're making a map of your life and your family's life. And that can raise things. It can be emotionally stimulating, or vulnerable, or touching. How do you suggest that one approaches this exercise, whether it's emotionally, spiritually. Just as a way to enter into it so one is not going to overwhelmed or touch any hurting places that they're not prepared to go.

Jim Finley:

Yes. That's very good. Well, let's say that you come from a happy, nurturing, well-adjusted normal family. There are people out there like that. And no family's perfect. No matter how well-adjusted it is, there's hurts and things. But chances are you were not so fortunate to come from a family that was like that. And even it might have been primarily like that, but there was some maybe very painful moments in it. And maybe some of your moments, painful moments, didn't come from your mother or your father. It came from a classmate, or a teacher, or somebody else, a neighbor.

So here's a thought. Always safety first, like nothing happens without safety. So as you're drawing a line and you're lining up hurtful people, what you're being very careful to watch is to what extent does the memory of that person, or what that person did, reactivate painful emotions in you? It isn't just that it would activate discomfort, because uncomfortable things are uncomfortable. But it would suggest that there's a possible degree of unhealed trauma. Unhealed.

In other words, there are certain traumatizing moments for the event that happened long ago, passed away. But the effects of it linger on within us, sometimes for years. And a triggering event is anything in the present that in some way resembles that trauma. It could be [inaudible 00:14:13] sexuality, being the presence of an authority figure, being the presence of someone who's angry, being in the presence, whatever. And where there's internalized trauma, this exercise could be a triggering event.

So what you do is you put parentheses around it and move on for now. Don't go there. Then what you do is you take a look at that event, and this depend on a lot of variables. Like, is this something you need to like prayerfully think about or go talk with somebody and that would help you work it through? It has to do with grieving really. How do you remember the feeling level? Grieve it, integrate it into your experience of yourself, what you learned from it and move on.

But maybe the intensity of the trauma has about it a degree of intensity that may require more help than that. And you would decide, "Well, I know this is

there, but I don't think it's affecting me," or "I know it's there. This is another reminder, if I'm really honest, it does affect me and I should get help with this. I should try to find somebody who's trained to help people walk through these traumatizing events, integrate them and move on."

And a milder version would be like, say, in AA with the sponsor. Someone who's more well-seasoned in the path of sobriety. But sometimes just a friend, a spiritual director, someone who's acting in effect like a sponsor with whom you tell your story. But with more severe trauma, unless a person's trained to do that, things like self-cutting, flashbacks, self-loathing, suicidal ideation, feelings of worthlessness, et cetera, et cetera, cetera. Then you owe it to yourself. Just like someone with diabetes, they owe it to themselves to honor the gift of their life by taking their or insulin. Someone with unfinished severe trauma that's bleeding out into their life, they owe it to themselves to get the help they need to walk through it as another dimension of interior, spiritual sobriety. So that's an important point.

Another thing I would add is this. As you do this, you hold up your father, your mother, your brothers, or sisters, people you know, it helps you have empathy with others. You can tell when somebody's hurting, and you can tell when you hit a trip wire. You can tell that they have an unprocessed. But this can help you have empathic sensitivity with them. And based on the relationship, what it is to talk to them about it or set a boundary, or just notice it. I mean, whatever. I would say, it's sensitive to things like that. Yeah.

Paul: Thanks, Jim. That's really helpful in this process and reminds me of something.

Jim Finley: And I'm thinking of one more thing.

Paul: Oh yeah. Please.

Jim Finley: Let's say there is this trauma. Let's say there is something like this going on inside of you. You also then owe it to take care of yourself, say, in watching TV. There's certain things you shouldn't watch whether other people might think it's funny or it's just fun. They just laugh it off. But you don't. And you know that you shouldn't. You shouldn't. So you're kind of just careful to practice the sobriety of being watchful over your own heart, and you're not engaging in activities that you know are inherently hurtful to you.

Paul: That's so clarifying in this process. Something else that came to me as you were speaking that I think might be helpful to touch on, is just how, although you've given the structure to this exercise, how every single person's exercises are going to look very different. Because there's no right way in that sense to do this exercise. Because the right way is the life that you're living, that you're trying to illuminate that story through the presence of God. I wonder if you could just speak to that, because sometimes I know that we get caught up in the story of like, am I doing this exercise correctly?

Jim Finley:

Well, yes. That's another important point I think. I want to share with you how this works in therapy. Let's say a person's working through internalized trauma, and it comes to the place where I introduce this exercise to them and they might think it's helpful. So I suggest to them what it is, what its benefits are, ask them if they think it might be helpful, they'd like to try it.

So then what I do is I hand them a piece of paper and I get a piece of paper and I model it for them. I do the storyline like this and I hold it up, and they do it like this. And then the categories down, like what was the event? What did it feel like at the time? And I say, "So why don't you then go home this week, and if you're so inclined start filling in your storyline." So some people come in the next week, they have their storyline all filled and are like, "What next?"

Other people will come in and say, "I was busy this week." And then you say, "Well, I know it's life. You can get awfully busy sometimes. Give it another try if you want to." Then another person will say, "I lost it," or "My dog ate it," or whatever it is. You say, "Well, that's fine. Would you like to try it again?" And then you say, about the third time, "You know, I think we should either just not do this or let's have a talk about why this is, although understandably challenging, it's so challenging that right now you could use some support in finding a way to calibrate it back to a safer scale." For example, to do a storyline and start out first with all the happy things for the only things that would go on your storyline. And then when you talk about that, we would just take one sad thing, and then you choose what sad thing.

Another big thing about this to know is when you do this in therapy, you just don't do it as an exercise and move on. You would take one of the memories and you would do a visualization with it. Remember like your room like this. Close your eyes, visualize it. What feelings do you have? Whatever. And so this isn't just like something done as a project, but it's done as a meditative act. And the goal is to be meditatively present to yourself, what you feel in your body, where you are with it.

You could take just even one memory, and as part of your daily meditation practice, you could reflect on that one memory and what it would mean to your higher power through God's grace to touch that memory with healing, energy and forgiveness. So you're always going at this in your own way. You're always doing this at your own pace. You're always doing this as a meditative way to be more quietly present to yourself in an authentic, engaged way.

See, because if we constantly stay way far off from hurtful things, we can't get close enough to heal them if we can't touch them with love. But if we move too fast, we get retraumatized. And so the art is finding that balance so you can feel the discomfort. And then for the love's sake, because you're worth saving, you're worth helping, you would monitor that, and touch the hurting place by remembering it, walking with it, backing off, writing about, reapproaching it.

And so I've found some people, there were a period of months and years. This just becomes an ongoing, inner way to be more present to themselves and the interconnectedness with others and so on. Yeah. It's like their 11 step. One of the ways they would practice their 11 step conscious contact with God is understanding.

Paul: Thank you, Jim. What I really appreciate about what you just said is just the ongoing nature of this as a meditative exercise. How I hear it, and how I've experienced my own practice is that sometimes when I think I'm done with something or a certain part of my life, it just gets more nuanced and more subtle. And so that examination sometimes will bear more gifts, or more insight as I sit with it in a place of meditation.

And so a practice like the can carry on for, as you said, weeks and months, and even years. As I look back over my own life, I've known that to be true. And this is part of, I think, the gift of the 12 steps to me is the way you teach it through that mystical lens that can get ever deeper. I wonder if you can touch further on that?

Jim Finley: Yes, yes. Two things on that. When you stop and think about it in a way, although you might do this exercise for a while, [inaudible 00:23:43]. But the real point is just like Socrates, "The unexamined life is not worth living." What we're really talking about is being more consistently present to your own life, up to the moment of your death that you not be a stranger to yourself, you not be distant from the stirrings of your own heart, that there's kind of a loving oneness with yourself that incarnates God's loving oneness with you.

And really that's what you're practicing, in Buddhist terms kind of a mindfulness practice, is really becoming a mindful person, a tender-hearted person, an ethic-sensitive person. And so really it's like all meditation practices. It begins first as kind of a formal. I think meditation, we might say, is an act which when we engage in it with our whole heart, it lays bare our true nature. And in doing so, it lays bear God's nature given to us as our own true nature. And I think that's the real goal here, where it moves beyond practices into an habituated sensitivity to a contemplative character transformation, because that's the true sobriety, I think. Yeah.

Paul: Thank you, Jim. That seems like an excellent place to end with that invitation to contemplative character transformation. I love that.

Jim Finley: Yeah.