

## Interview with James Finley: Cultivating a Contemplative Lifestyle

---

*Conducted and Transcribed by Glenn Crider*

June 11, 2006

**Crider:** First, I would like to ask about your family background and how it influenced you as a child and teenager. Also, how influential was the Church for you while growing up?

**Finley:** I was born and grew up in Akron, Ohio. I was the oldest of six children. My father worked in rubber factories and then for the Post Office. The Church was very influential in my life. My father was a violent alcoholic. My mother was a devout Catholic. Through her I learned to find solace in faith, which became a primary influence in my life as a refuge from the abuse.

**Crider:** Was there a particular point when you first thought about a religious vocation?

**Finley:** In my ninth grade religion class, the instructor told us about Thomas Merton. I read Merton's *The Sign of Jonas*.<sup>1</sup> In fact, I read it over and over again, which led me to write the Vocation Director at Gethsemani. At fourteen, I became aware of an interior awareness or self-sense of God's oneness and then learned to rest in that. This then led to my entering the community a week after I graduated from high school in 1961.

**Crider:** Your experience at age fourteen was, I assume, unique considering your background. You mention the tangible experience of God. That is not acknowledged or even accepted in all Christian churches. On the other hand, I grew up in a Pentecostal church where direct experience of God was regularly sought after and celebrated.

**Finley:** Yes. Both the Pentecostal and the monastic traditions of the Christian faith emphasize the experience of God. But the emphasis is different. In the Pentecostal tradition the emphasis is on a felt sense of God's presence and the Holy Spirit being experienced in a flow of strong emotions. The monastic tradition also

stresses the felt sense of God's presence. But the emphasis is more on contemplation as a silent, non-dual experience of God beyond both feelings and thoughts about God. There is a distinction between how the two traditions express that. But I do think they are traditions of this experience and the emphasis [is] on the actual experience.

**Crider:** You first heard of Merton while in the ninth grade. When did you hear about Gethsemani itself?

**Finley:** They were simultaneous because a religious instructor at the Catholic high school I was attending talked about Thomas Merton and *The Seven Storey Mountain*,<sup>2</sup> which was very popular at the time.

**Crider:** What year was that?

**Finley:** 1958. And I entered Gethsemani in 1961.

**Crider:** So you went there right after high school?

**Finley:** Yes. I went immediately. In fact, I think I went the day after graduation.

**Crider:** What were your first memories of Gethsemani?

**Finley:** I arrived in the afternoon on a Greyhound bus from New Haven. Then someone drove me out to the monastery. I then went up to the loft of the Church. This was when the visitors were in the loft in the back of the Church. The monks chanting vespers was the first experience that stands out to me. Although I had heard LP records of chants, I had never been in the presence of chanting like that. That was my first experience, and it was very moving. Along with that, during my initial stay there when I was being interviewed about being admitted to the community, it was the chanting combined with the silence that really affected me.

**Crider:** What was your religious name?

**Finley:** Br. Mary Finbar. St. Finbar was Bishop of County Cork in Ireland and also a hermit. I guess the idea was that your religious name was given in part due to your own cultural-ethnic background. Coming from an Irish background, I was given the name Br. Finbar.

**Crider:** How long did you live at Gethsemani?

**Finley:** I was there for five and a half years. When I went there to be interviewed and accepted, I went back home. Then I came back

and entered formally in July (1961). So I was there from July 1961 to January 1967.

**Crider:** When did you first meet Merton?

**Finley:** I first met Merton as a novice under his direction. When I first entered, Gethsemani was divided up between the brothers and the choir. And each had their own novitiate. So the brothers lead lives of silence, prayer and manual labor. The choir monks lead lives of study, silence, prayer and manual labor. At the time in the tradition, the choir went on to ordination into the priesthood. When I entered, I entered in the brothers. Then after about a year, I changed over from the brothers to the choir. Since Thomas Merton was Novice Master of choir novices, I came under his direction. That is when I met him. Shortly after that, the two novitiates were merged anyway, and he became Novice Master of all the novices.

**Crider:** Do you remember the year?

**Finley:** That was 1962.

**Crider:** What kind of relationship did you have with Merton? What was it like?

**Finley:** Having come from all my childhood abuse, it was a kind of healing relationship. He was a safe "father-figure" for me. So I think that played a big part with my relationship with him. Secondly, I think he was a voice of common sense. He accepted me and gave me a lot of slack and kind of gave me permission to find my own way. He was honest with me, and that helped me be honest with myself. It was a lot of that kind of common-sense feel to it. Lastly, I really saw him as embodying the mystical monastic tradition itself. I really felt that I was in the presence of somebody from whom this tradition lived. So he embodied the reality of the tradition.

**Crider:** So you were comfortable with him.

**Finley:** I was. At first I was not because of my issues with authority figures. I was actually very nervous around him. But he helped me work that through. Once I worked through that, we could settle down and really start talking about prayer, meditation, silence and all of that. I felt very comfortable with him then.

**Crider:** I have spoken with a few others who knew Merton, and they all say he was very easy to talk to and to be with. Perhaps his

common sense somehow allowed him to relate well with nearly all whom he came across. And he seemed to have a profound effect on those persons.

**Finley:** Yes. It was true for me. The thing about him is that he seemed so transparently present. He was authentically present. I think when we are in the presence of someone who is so present, we intuit that. It affects us.

**Crider:** At that time, he was very well known, even famous, yet he was able to connect to people in a real, authentic way.

**Finley:** Yes. He was at the peak of his powers then—the early 1960s. He was beginning to develop his own style with the Buddhist-Christian dialogue. B. Griffith and Thich Nhat Hanh had been to visit him. He was really at the height of his powers.

**Crider:** How often did you meet with him?

**Finley:** We were scheduled to meet him individually about twice a month. It was posted each day on a little board in the novitiate hallway. I think two a day would go in.

**Crider:** So he would meet with novices individually. How long were these meetings?

**Finley:** My impression was that it really varied. If you did not have much to say, the session ended quickly. But if you opened up and got into it, he would pursue that.

**Crider:** Are there other experiences with Merton that stand out for you?

**Finley:** Not really. I think that the deepest of all of it is that he encouraged me to be radically faithful to this inner path. He encouraged me not to compromise that.

**Crider:** Aside from Merton, what else do you remember about Gethsemani and how life there influenced you?

**Finley:** I saw it as everything about the life was designed to foster this awareness of God's presence. So the symbols of the life, the pace of the life, the reading—all of it was ordered toward that one end of following this contemplative path. That is how I saw it—as an atmospheric, all-enveloping path. The biggest of all for me was the silence. Having been so completely silent day-in and day-out had a profound effect.

**Crider:** Do you have any favorite memories about Gethsemani?

**Finley:** There were many pleasant memories that were simply part of the day-by-day patterns of just being there. For me, the most powerful memories were those of my own experiences, those moments where I truly felt a sense of oneness with God. But they came in the midst of the day-by-day ordinary rhythms of the life itself rather than something that happened externally.

**Crider:** The realization that routines inspire insight is, I think, key to developing a contemplative life.

If you could or would change anything about your years at Gethsemani, what would it be?

**Finley:** I think when I went in I was naïve. I kind of assumed that it was not possible to be hurt in the monastery in any way. I discovered though that monks are just people, and things happen in monasteries just like things happen throughout the rest of the world. So I wish, in hindsight, that I had had a more realistic sense of the humanness of monasteries. I will leave it at that.

**Crider:** Will you say a word about the significance or importance of monasticism?

**Finley:** I think monasticism bears witness to the human person's openness to transcendence. It is at the very heart of what it means to be human. That is the most important thing for me. Furthermore, monasticism makes it possible to pursue the realization of that openness. It is possible to devote your life to the path of awakening to that transcendence. It is open to all of us.

**Crider:** Do you distinguish monasticism as a better or more conducive route to transcendence?

**Finley:** Yes and no. I think at one level—at the psychological level—it is more conducive. It allows a quiet pacing of your schedule; living in silence, being surrounded by sacred symbols, and so on. All of these things are conducive to mindfulness and introspection and being vulnerable to God's presence. In that sense, monasticism is more conducive to opening one to transcendence because it is designed to do just that. That is the reason it exists. That is the genius of the life because everything about the life points in that direction.

I think at a deeper level, monasticism is not necessarily a better way to God. At a deeper level, we grow where we are planted.

Some people find that their present situations are most conducive.

**Crider:** Thinking about what draws one to monastic life, I wonder how that attraction develops.

**Finley:** I think there are many reasons—both healthy and unhealthy—people are drawn to monastic life. Part of the admissions screening process includes discernment and then considering the validity of what draws them. In a healthy way, it is important to recognize that the monastery is a place that fosters one's desire to realize oneness with God. And they feel God personally calling them to that. I also think that sometimes people have a mystical experience or awakening, and they automatically assume they should go to a monastery to foster that. If they go along and sort it out, they discover they can be faithful to that [mystical experience] in other contexts.

**Crider:** You have mentioned psychology already. When did you decide to study psychology?

**Finley:** When I left the monastery, I had not thought of studying psychology. I got an undergraduate degree in English literature and education as well as a master's degree in education. I taught religion in the Catholic schools of the Cleveland diocese in Cleveland, Ohio. I co-authored a series of high school religion text books with a colleague. It was also during that time that I then wrote *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*.<sup>3</sup> That book came out in 1978. When it came out, I began to receive invitations from around the country to lead retreats on Thomas Merton and contemplative spirituality. In 1979, about a year after the book came out, I was invited to Seattle, Washington to give a retreat. The person leading the retreat, John Finch, a psychologist, asked me if I had ever considered integrating the work I was doing in spirituality with psychology. I said I had not thought of doing that. He said if I would be willing to write a theoretical dissertation integrating contemplative spirituality with psychology, he would see to it that I had a full scholarship for Ph.D. in psychology. So, to make a long story short, I came back to my home in South Bend, Indiana and decided to do that. I left South Bend and came out to Pasadena, California to the Graduate School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary. I spent five years doing full time doctoral work and then became a psychologist.

**Crider:** It sounds like your career in psychology snuck-up on you, or came unexpectedly.

**Finley:** It did. When I think about what was going on in my home when I was growing up—the violence and so on—it just amazes me that I ended up at Gethsemani. Likewise, after leaving, it amazed me that this guy comes and hands me this opportunity. So they both kind of snuck-up on me.

**Crider:** Given your experience in both monasticism and professional psychology, what can you say about the relationship between monastic writing and writings by those interested in spiritual direction and contemplation?

**Finley:** My basic understanding is that the writing of monastics tends to be writings in contemplative spiritual direction. It has this pragmatic quality of helping the person discern the path of self-transformation and spiritual awakening. So that is the quality to it. The writings of those interested in spiritual direction are in the same venue of helping people discern the path, but they tend not to be so specifically contemplative in nature. They are more broadly based on how to discern God's will in their present situation, or how to discern what is the most loving or Christ-like thing to do. But I think both monastic writings and more broadly based writings in spiritual direction are guidance on the spiritual path. But the writings of monastics, for understandable reasons, tend to be more specifically coming out of and focused toward those who have a more overtly contemplative emphasis in their journey.

**Crider:** When did you consider writing yourself?

**Finley:** I wrote at the monastery. I kept journals all the time. I never thought of being a writer, however. But writing was always a kind of meditative practice to try to put words to inner experiences.

**Crider:** Judging from the success and popularity of *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*, your writing appears to be quite a talent and gift.

**Finley:** Yes, I think it is a gift. Like any writer, I guess you keep working on it over time. But I really think the popularity of that book is due to a combination of factors. One, its popularity is due to a great extent that it was about Thomas Merton. He was especially popular then, which was not long after his death. So the book came out during a wave of growing interest in Merton. Sec-

only, I think the book put its finger on a very rich theme in Merton's writing: this whole question of the true self. For example, what is the self that transcends the ego? So it is the combination of Merton being an extremely popular religious figure and a theme in his writings. I tried to do that in a way that would be practical for people and, for example, help them gain insight into their own identity and so forth.

**Crider:** Do you continue to read Merton?

**Finley:** I do. I read him on and off, but in snippets. I will pull a book down and read a few paragraphs. I find that reading him instantaneously reinstates a sense of connection.

**Crider:** Regarding Cistercian monasteries, do you visit them often since you left?

**Finley:** I would like to more than I do. I was last at Gethsemani about ten years ago. I was supposed to give a retreat at Nazareth [...] last year but that did not work out. I just do not have much opportunity to visit those monasteries much. I give retreats around the country. But in terms of visiting a monastery for some time, I just do not have that opportunity often.

**Crider:** You have talked some about giving retreats, will you say more about what you do now?

**Finley:** I am a clinical psychologist in private practice in Santa Monica, California. My wife is also a therapist. We are in practice together. I work a lot with adult survivors of abuse and emotional deprivation from childhood. There are people who want their spirituality to be a resource in therapy. So I do that kind of in-depth therapy work three days a week—Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Then Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, I write. And about one weekend a month, I give a retreat either locally or somewhere else in the United States or Canada.

**Crider:** Do you view your work as a ministry or related to a ministry?

**Finley:** I experience it as a ministry. In other words, what interests me about in-depth therapy is that it offers a safe place in which one can slow down and start to listen to oneself in the presence of another person who will not invade or abandon them. That process of slowing down and listening tends to evoke a more interior contemplative experience of their own presence. I think that pro-



cess is in itself at the very heart of healing. Once a person discovers this experiential access to the mystery of their own presence, which is a very deep way of experiencing God's presence, then that gives them a base from which they can understand and look at whatever psychological issues they are struggling with. Low self-esteem, addiction, whatever it might be. I consider my work as therapist to be a ministry in that sense. I also see retreats as an opportunity for people to get together and experience kinship. There you have a collective desire to follow this interior path, to give talks on Merton or Meister Eckhart or John of the Cross or just the tradition. It is the same with writing too. I experience it all as a ministry.

**Crider:** Within therapy, do you find that a particular orientation serves you better than another?

**Finley:** I tend to work with people on a psychodynamic, existential, transpersonal continuum. What I mean by that is that my emphasis is on the existential. I try to help a person understand how they contribute to their own difficulties. As they start to understand that and how hard it is to stop doing that, in order to get to the root, they more or less have to go back to their childlike origins where those patterns formed as dysfunctional survival strategies. That is the psychodynamic part. Then I find that when two people sit like that, in that kind of vulnerable openness, they discover they are sitting on holy ground together. That is the transpersonal and contemplative part. That is how I express my theoretical orientation.

**Crider:** Psychodynamic therapy cuts to the root of behavior, in my opinion. It definitely helps a person better understand why he or she thinks and behaves in certain ways. It can be a truly transformative process.

To change the focus somewhat, a less talked about relationship is that between contemplation and marriage. It seems that most contemplative and spiritual writings focus on the individual. What do you think about the role of contemplation within a marriage?

**Finley:** First of all, for many reasons, people's experience of marriage does not tend to be conducive to contemplation. In other words, because of the day-by-day life and demands of marriage and children and so forth, a lot of people do not become aware of the potential of contemplation within marriage. But for those who

begin to become aware of this, they often see that there is something about marriage that is essentially contemplative. At the heart of marriage is intimacy. At the heart of intimacy is two people realizing that they are one. And they are one in some unexplainable way. They are one in a way that they cannot define or pin down. That experience of oneness is itself a contemplative experience. This oneness has a certain boundless quality. Some couples experience oneness with each other in the way they experience God's oneness with them. Therefore, ideally speaking, marriage is a path for contemplative awareness. For those who are aware of this together, marriage can then be a contemplative way of life. I am fortunate that way. This is my second marriage. My present wife lived alone for many years kind of seeking this interior path and so on. We are kind of hermits together. That is the basis of our marriage.

**Crider:** Building on these comments, what do you think "ordinary" (non-monastic) people can do to cultivate a contemplative lifestyle?

**Finley:** First, I think it is very hard to say this in the abstract. It is easiest for me when I sit and talk with the person who is actually asking me the questions. I usually start by asking them questions about themselves so it becomes concrete in their own lives. It tends to become more meaningful that way. But basically I would invite people to slow down, to start becoming more aware of what is already going on and to start to appreciate the depth of their day-by-day life. It is a sheer miracle to be alive. It is a miracle that we exist at all, that our hearts beat and that we breathe. This taps into the sacredness of ordinary things. Becoming quietly reflective and open allows one to grow in this awareness. Learning to do the most loving thing in the moment is key. What can I do for myself or this other person? How can I keep growing in this awareness and presence of my life? That is the tone of what I tend to tell people about the contemplative lifestyle.

**Crider:** So a first step is to become aware of what is already there, of what is so easy to overlook?

**Finley:** That is right. Let us say you are asking me that question now. You ask me and I then ask, "What prompts you to ask that question?" You would answer. Then I would say, "Give me an example." You would give an example, and within just a few min-

utes you are becoming more present to yourself. You are stopping to check in and to ask, "How am I going to answer that?" That very process of slowing down to check in with your self is already the beginning of a more interior, meditative awareness.

**Crider:** Why do you think a contemplative lifestyle is important for today's culture?

**Finley:** Without some sense of contemplation, I think we are lost. Thich Nhat Hanh says if we are not practicing mindfulness, our house is abandoned. Contemplation is the experiential access to the ground of our own being and its inherent holiness. When we are not grounded in some way in that, we are kind of spinning out. We are not rooted into what it means to be alive. That, I think, is its importance.

**Crider:** What about contemporary culture and how it may or may not make a contemplative lifestyle possible?

**Finley:** In a lot of obvious ways, there are many forces in contemporary society that make it challenging for anyone to be contemplative. Merton spoke a lot about that. Much of what he talked about is as true today as when he wrote, such as, the momentum of things, the externalization of our lives, our insensitivity to ourselves and to one another. But at the same time, I have found that the underlying genuineness of people is always there. Although it does not readily appear, when you take a closer look there are ways people try to find their way to a sacred place.

**Crider:** And, again, it is a matter of becoming aware of this possibility of living a more authentic life.

**Finley:** Exactly. That is the value of writings like Thomas Merton's. When people read Merton, it renews and deepens their awareness of this dimension in their lives. The fact that he spoke in such a straight-from-the-shoulder way, with such direct clarity so the words go straight to your heart, is what is so inviting about him. He gives people a way of accessing themselves.

**Crider:** Your book *The Contemplative Heart*<sup>4</sup> is also invitational in this way.

**Finley:** It is a series of essays on how to live a more contemplative way of life in the midst of the world. They are poetic essays on ways people can awaken this more interior awareness and how to cultivate it. So it is essentially a series of poetic essays on the cul-

tivation of contemplative mindfulness and contemplative living. In hindsight, the writing style of the book, the long sentences do not make it as immediately accessible to a lot of people. My book *Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God*<sup>5</sup> and the book I am writing now show a shift in this style of writing. I have been more inspired by people like Josef Pieper and Merton's own writings where its shorter, more accessible style helps access that same depth of life.

**Crider:** Were your years at Gethsemani a significant influence on your writings?

**Finley:** It was very influential. I do not know how to put words to it exactly. While at the monastery, in my own limited way I broke through into a direct realization of God's oneness with us and with life itself. It changed me forever. The writing I have done since, tries to put words to that experience or to speak out of that space or to say things that might help others find their own way to that. It was the original place from which I broke through into the place I am writing out of.

**Crider:** So your time at Gethsemani provided a basic foundation for writing.

**Finley:** Yes. It did. But it also provided the basic foundation for my life. After I left the monastery my primary concern was how to continue living "out here" within the contemplative way of life which I was introduced to at the monastery. Because my writings come out of my life, they often come out of that particular space.

**Crider:** How did you decide to leave Gethsemani?

**Finley:** Some things happened at the monastery that opened up memories of the abuse I experienced at home, which I had never really processed or looked at. I just buried them inside of me, ran away from home and went to the monastery. I started having flashbacks of the abuse and became depressed. I realized that I could not run from that. It was inside of me and I had to deal with it. For different reasons, I felt that I could not deal with it inside the monastery. So I needed to come out here to face things on my own. I talked to Fr. John Eudes Bamberger about it as well as Dom James who was Abbot at the time. I went up to Merton's hermitage too. I got permission to see him. I did not tell him the details but gave him the gist of what was going on. And he agreed.

**Crider:** How helpful was Merton's advice or agreement that you should leave?

**Finley:** It was very helpful. I think he was telling me that at the deepest level, it does not really matter where you seek this path because it is really everywhere. So you need to take care of your unfinished business and trust that when you get to the bottom of all of that you will providentially be where you are meant to be. He gave me confidence in that and in my decision. He also thought I should become a hermit after I sorted that out. I had had permission to stay so many hours a day in an abandoned sheep barn. I helped him take care of his hermitage and I was in the novitiate under his direction. So he allowed me to stay so many hours a day in that sheep barn. Had I stayed, I probably would have gone in that direction. He saw me very drawn that way. As we talked, he gave me the address of someone who had a community of hermits somewhere in Nova Scotia. When I first left I thought that is what I would do, but I did not.

**Crider:** So did you spend more time with Merton than the others did?

**Finley:** Yes and no. As far as one-on-one time, I had no more than anyone else. During the two year novitiate I stayed longer after temporary vows just so I could still have access to him. Because of the role that he played in my life and because I was so drawn to this way of solitude, by helping him clean his hermitage and get fire wood and so on, I was perhaps more in his proximity than others. But I did not feel the need to talk to him after I left the novitiate except for the time I went to talk about leaving and then the night before I left.

**Crider:** What year did you leave?

**Finley:** January, 1967.

**Crider:** Do you have any final comments?

**Finley:** I think we have covered the bases well. I would like to comment on how *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* came to be written as a book. Right after Merton died, the Editor of the *National Catholic Reporter* came to Gethsemani and interviewed Fr. Flavian Burns (who was Abbot at the time) about Merton. In their discussion, Fr. Flavian mentioned to him Merton's idea of the True Self, the transcendent self beyond ego. This person was very taken by that and suggested to Fr. Flavian that if he put together an anthology of

Merton's passages on the True Self, it would make a good book. Fr. Flavian was not inclined to do that so he wrote to me and asked if I would be interested. So I put together what I thought would be a collection of Merton's quotes on the True Self. Then all these Merton books began coming out. And The Merton Legacy Trust said they were not inclined to approve of any more collections of Merton's quotes. They were concerned that the market would be glutted with all these Merton diaries and cook books and so on. Since I had the quotes already gathered, I decided to write a book using the quotes as the centerpiece. That is how it came to be written.

**Crider:** How long did it take to write?

**Finley:** It took about five years. Then it was published by Ave Maria Press in 1978.

## Notes

---

1. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953).

2. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948).

3. James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1978).

4. James Finley, *The Contemplative Heart* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2000).

5. James Finley, *Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004).