

## Finley's Choices (and Ours)

Review of  
*The Healing Path: A Memoir and an Invitation*

By James Finley  
Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2023  
166 pages / \$22.00 paper

Reviewed by **Gregory J. Ryan**

Every choice brings consequences and challenges – some good, some bad. In this insightful book, clinical psychologist, psychotherapist, retreat leader and healer James Finley shares some of the life-changing choices he has made throughout his life. But as the subtitle indicates, the book is not only his personal memoir, but an invitation for his readers to reflect on the choices and wrestle with the challenges they face in their own lives.

Finley first appeared on my radar in 1978 when his book *Merton's Palace of Nowhere: A Search for God through Awareness of the True Self* was published. In that book, he shares what he learned during his years as a novice under Thomas Merton. After years of having read Merton, *Merton's Palace* was the first book (for me, at least) written by someone who had “learned from the master” directly and was now sharing what he had learned with his readers who were living “ordinary” lives outside a monastery. I’m embarrassed to say that I hadn’t read anything more by Finley until *The Healing Path* came into my hands. And I’m very glad that it did.

The *Memoir* aspect of the book shares with the reader the shocking emotional, psychological and physical harm done to Finley in his family life before entering the monastery and, *even more shockingly*, while he was living in the monastery (?!?!). But the truest value of the book is the *Invitation*.

Finley is not only a healer, but a wounded healer. Throughout the book, as he tells about the traumas he experienced at home and in the monastery, he invites the reader to reflect on the pain and suffering in her or his own life, and to discern a path to go beyond the effects of that pain and suffering and to integrate it into their lives. I would say the markers along the path are: Trauma, Healing, Forgiveness – Repeat. His healing touch is present on every page.

Following the Acknowledgments and thirteen-page Introduction are 11 chapters, each a kind of mini-therapy session. Finley shares one of his own particularly challenging life experiences, plumbs the meaning he found in it for himself, and then invites the reader to reflect on their own lives and to do the same. It’s axiomatic for Finley that the Presence of God is found *in the midst* of our suffering – and, ultimately, in our death. After all, death-with-resurrection is the hope (and everyday experience) of every Christian.

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**Gregory Ryan** and his wife Liz wrote and illustrated the children’s book, *The ABCs of Thomas Merton: A Monk at the Heart of the World* (Paraclete Press, 2017). He coordinates the local ITMS Chapter in St. Rose Parish, Belmar, NJ, which meets online the first Tuesday of every month to discuss one of Merton’s books. A Benedictine oblate, he also leads an online weekly Christian meditation group there ([www.WCCM.org](http://www.WCCM.org)). To join either group, one may send an email to: [GJRyan@WCCM.org](mailto:GJRyan@WCCM.org).

At the start, Finley tells about his troubled family life growing up in Akron, Ohio. (You'll find that "troubled" is an understatement!) He also introduces us to the two people who were most instrumental in his recovery from all the trauma: his mother during his childhood and later, after leaving the monastery, his second wife, Maureen. Their 30-year marriage was the truest of love stories. Maureen's presence is felt throughout the book.

Besides writing books, leading contemplative retreats and giving spiritual direction, Finley has a quiet and compassionate presence online. (Google his name for a gaggle of links.) He is a core faculty member at the Living School at the Center for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico with Richard Rohr and others.

I will close with this: you should definitely buy this latest book by James Finley. But while you wait to receive delivery, search on YouTube for his 2-hour, 15-minute video about the book, entitled "Becoming a Healing Presence in a Traumatized World."

But buy the book first.