

a spiritual mentor, as a guide, as a poet, as a fellow human. The essays show a “friendship” with Merton, a mystical relationship, by definition, one beyond time and space. Dr. Cannon explores Merton, studies him, expands on his concepts of true self, solitude, interfaith dialogue, peacemaking and oneness. His links to Father Louis are diverse and clever, and there you find Merton linked with Camus (119-28) or walking hand by hand with St. John of the Cross (74-84).

Dr. Cannon’s words are written with sincerity, humility, vulnerability and empathy. He ponders on the philosophical “Who am I?” He finds the mystical answer in his deep faith, in prayer and in altruism. He finds it through the writings of Thomas Merton. *In Search of the Healing Spirit* is a trek inside the soul, to the deepest part of a self, an encounter with an essential identity, a oneness with God. Like Michaelangelo envisioning David within a solid piece of marble in Florence, Dr. Cannon cuts through the weeds, cleans the clutter and hence clears the path to his own core, to the little spot of nothingness in the center of being, to his “point vierge.”

Jose Andujar

FINLEY, James, *The Healing Path: A Memoir and an Invitation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2023), pp. xxi, 166. ISBN 978-1626985100 (paper) \$22.00.

As a clinical psychologist and renowned spiritual retreat leader, James Finley has accumulated decades of experience intensely listening to patients and retreatants intimately share their stories of trauma. In *The Healing Path: A Memoir and an Invitation*, Finley is the vulnerable one, letting readers in on the “bittersweet alchemy” (8) of his own life. He reveals details about the repeated traumas he endured in childhood and young adulthood, and the interior darkness that followed. But the author moves far beyond a litany of painful memories to probe the mystery of spiritual awakening in the depths of interior upheaval and sorrow.

Finley aptly refers to *The Healing Path* as a kind of teaching memoir, a way to share life lessons about inner brokenness. Memoir, as a literary genre, has often been dominated by celebrities and political figures with prominent platforms and paid ghostwriters. Memoirists may have dramatic stories to tell, but their narratives can feel as though the writer “has been stranded on the island of their own personal life story, stranded there with no connection at all to the mainland.”<sup>1</sup> What is often missing in these titles is real depth of content, an honest and deep grappling, an authentic personal or intellectual pursuit of meaning and understanding.

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1. Judith Barrington, *Writing the Memoir* (Portland, OR: Eighth Mountain Press, 2002) 141.

Finley's memoir achieves a higher literary and spiritual purpose because it does more than chronicle events that led to his traumatized self. He has crafted a memoir not to call attention to himself, but to draw readers into the spiritual dimension of healing. Readers will immediately be attracted to his engaging, non-clinical voice, as he tells the tale of his "radicalization" – a favorite word employed throughout the book to describe genuine moments of psychological and spiritual breakthroughs.

One of the great paradoxes of the human condition is that we exist in the midst of annihilation and grace. Within a split second, trauma may strike to permanently alter life's path. Children die, homelands are bombed, families are wrecked by drug addiction. Memories of abandonment, violence and abuse are hard to let go, and leave us feeling interiorly lost and broken. Finley hopes to lift these inner veils of darkness by focusing on the healing spirit of unity, harmony and wholeness, and to break certain habits of mind that are roadblocks to discovering a contemplative intimacy with God.

Among Merton scholars, James Finley is a household name, recognized as author of the well-known book *Merton's Palace of Nowhere: A Search for God through Awareness of the True Self*, first published in 1978 by Ave Maria Press.<sup>2</sup> Considered a classic in the canon of Merton scholarship, the title has never gone out of print. Reviewers praised both the 25<sup>th</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary editions<sup>3</sup> and cited it as a book that continues to enrich readers.

Given Finley's reputation as a popular speaker who also serves as faculty member at Fr. Richard Rohr's Living School at the Center of Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, *The Healing Path* will likely reach a broad swath of readers outside the Merton establishment.

The narrative opens in the present day with a moving Introduction at the moment of great personal loss as Maureen, his wife of 30 years, lays dying from the complications of Alzheimer's. During the shock of this comes the realization of how deeply their relationship with one another has included relationships "with the men and women who have come to us for psychotherapy and spiritual direction" (xii). The story then flashes back to his childhood growing up in Akron, Ohio, son of a devout Roman

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2. James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere: A Search for God through Awareness of the True Self*, Foreword by Henri J. M. Nouwen (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1978).

3. James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*, Foreword by Henri J. M. Nouwen, Foreword to new edition by Patrick Hart, OCSO (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2003); James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*, Foreword by Henri J. M. Nouwen, Preface to the New Edition: Forty Years Later (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2018).

Catholic mother of six, and of a violent, alcoholic father. *The Healing Path* is divided into 11 brief chapters that naturally transition to prayerful offerings as each chapter closes with Finley's refrain, "Amen. So be it." Overall, this creates an effect that author and reader are genuinely in conversation, in a contemplative retreat together.

In "My Childhood Initiation into Trauma and Transcendence," we are privy to the emotional pain and physical abuse his father – who is never referred to by name – inflicted on his oldest son James, the boy with the "angel sweet" persona, a facet of James' personality his father tried to physically beat out of him, to teach Finley how to be a man. (The reader never learns if father and son ever reconciled.)

It was also his mother's Roman Catholicism that would, at times, send her alcohol-fueled husband into explosive rages. As a teenager with five younger siblings, his mother relied on James to be her protectorate from the cruelty. From these experiences and the constant fears he carried, Finley learned at a young age to psychologically disassociate from the trauma, to be emotionally distant and to live in the passivity of his false self. God's all-encompassing presence first flowed to him as a young child, in spite of the family unhappiness, and this feeling of wonder sustained him.

To try and understand the transformative process of deep healing, Finley reminds us to reach back into our childhoods, to those moments where we intuited a graced awakening, though as children we lacked the vocabulary and spiritual maturity to understand or to talk about them. Finley describes these moments as "flashes of divinity" (24), "wondrous secrets" and "graced inclinations" (26). As Finley observes, "we must be careful not to allow our adult, conceptual comprehension of such things to close off the childlike opening of wonder through which the graces and gifts of God flow into our lives" (26).

General readers may be surprised to learn that Finley (b. 1943) was once a novice who studied under Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani in the period 1961-1967. He discovered Merton at age 14 when his teacher at his all-boys Catholic high school in Akron, Ohio told him about the famous Trappist. He first located *The Sign of Jonas*<sup>4</sup> in the school's library, later bought his own copy, and read Merton's journal alone in his room. He writes: "Merton's words, welling up from the depths of his own awakened heart, accessed the same hidden depth in me, occasioning a radicalized understanding of myself as someone who longed for solitary communion with God" (32).

A few days after high-school graduation, under tremendous pressure

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

from his father – including his father’s threat that he would murder his mother if he entered a monastery – James boarded a bus to the Abbey of Gethsemani. He was given the religious name of Brother (Mary) Finbar, in honor of a sixth-century Irish bishop of Cork. Finley, or Br. Finbar, felt certain his future career path was to live with God alone in sweet solitude. In those days, Finley recalls that he was a “devout, traumatized, just-out-of-high-school, would-be mystic with acne” (41).

The “would-be mystic” was in awe of Merton. Merton has been foundational to Finley’s personal and professional life ever since. He quotes Merton throughout *The Healing Path*, but Merton’s enigmatic presence does not take over the narrative. Finley remains fascinated that “Thomas Merton accepted his own poverty and limitations” (33). In *none* of Merton’s writings or recorded conferences, as Finley reminds us, does he come across as a self-satisfied spiritual master.

Chapter 6, “From the Pig Barn to the Sheep Barn and Beyond,” is an especially poignant part of the book, which recounts young Finley’s early and memorable moments with Fr. Louis. The author admits that as a young novice newly arrived at Gethsemani, and upon seeing Merton, he felt he was in the presence of “some towering figure, like Moses, coming down from the mountain, with his face [Merton’s] shining bright with the glory of God” (64). While first meeting Merton, he began to hyperventilate and became too nervous to speak in a clear and coherent way. The 18-year-old wanted Merton to think well of him, but young Finley was star-struck and terrified. With his voice shaking, Finley said, “I am afraid because you are Thomas Merton” (64). “Then something amazing happened. Instead of commenting on my anxiety, the wise monk said, in a calm and reassuring voice, ‘Under obedience I want you, each day, to end afternoon work a bit early so that you can come here to my office before Vespers to tell me one thing that happened that day in the pig barn’” (64). As Finley tells it, the anxiety drained out of him. Merton, as spiritual director, mentored him in such a low-key, humble and compassionate way that as a novice he learned important lessons about humility and mercy, and how “to find our way into the secrets of God’s face” (65).

A short time later, Dan Walsh, the philosophy professor at Columbia University who had mentored Tom Merton as a college student, and who was the first person to mention the Abbey of Gethsemani to Merton, visited the monastery. The abbot invited Walsh to revamp the monastery’s philosophy program. All novices were invited to sit in on the lectures, and as it turned out, Finley, a lay brother, excelled in philosophical studies and was soon invited to join the choir monks who were studying for the priesthood. He continued to receive private spiritual direction from Merton. With Fr. Louis’ permission, Br. Finbar began a daily ritual of

going the sheep barn's loft "to pray and be alone with God" (66). The author's reminiscences about the time he spent in the sheep barn looking out in silence over the meadow are a moving and lyrical part of the story.

Finley lived in the cloistered silence of the Abbey of Gethsemani but the path to true inner healing would still be a long and challenging one. In the chapter called "Refuge," he shares other key moments from his life's journey and the ongoing patterns of passivity and emotional distancing that plagued him. "It was going to be almost another twenty years before I would be healed from my longstanding fear of being true to myself in the midst of my own life" (93). In the God-laden silence, Finley recalls, he was radicalized again and transformed forever in God's sustaining mercy. Then, when he thought he was home-free, he was further traumatized in the monastery. Everything fell apart in painful ways, and once again, a darkness engulfed him.

In 1967, he abruptly left the monastery. He returned home to his parents, met and married the first woman he dated, fathered two daughters with her, and after a few years of teaching, began doctoral studies in California – all in quick succession. He eventually gained more clinical experience as a counselor to patients at a local Veteran's Administration hospital near his home in Pasadena and gave conferences and contemplative retreats to alcoholics. His first marriage unraveled, and life restarted again with Maureen. Much of this book is about awakening to the mysterious realms in which sorrow and joy merge with God's presence. He had to "re-learn how to enter that interior stance of heartfelt attentiveness in which the presence of God begins to make itself known" (101).

Contemplative living – with prayerful studies and quiet meditation – was possible without a monastery. While practicing his vocation, he delved into the contemplative wisdoms from many non-Christian sources, including Jewish mystics, Sufis and Buddhists. Through his vast professional experience, he has tried to make sense of the inherent psychological and spiritual paradox: the wall between trauma and transcendence is permeable.

This reviewer has not had the honor and pleasure of meeting James Finley nor have I heard him present at an ITMS event. As a wisdom keeper in his 80s, he is still giving back, still sharing profound insights and compassionate words of spiritual guidance. Besides his affiliation with Richard Rohr's center, he also hosts a podcast called *Turning to the Mystics*. *The Healing Path* represents a circling back and a way forward. It is God's limitless presence, he believes, that turns trauma into a mystical awakening of oneness that is beyond words. It is possible to exit the land of the lost, and to arrive at a more merciful understanding of our wounded selves. Finley's memoir is a call to trust and believe the healing path is reachable.

Kathleen Tarr