

Turning to the Mystics



Bonus: The Life and Work of
Teresa of Avila

featuring Mirabai Starr

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

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to The Mystics.

Kirsten Oates: Welcome to Season 2 of Turning to The Mystics. Today we're doing something a little different. Jim and I are here with Mirabai Starr, and she's going to join us for a dialogue about Teresa of Ávila. Mirabai has translated *The Interior Castle* as well as *Teresa of Ávila: The Book of My Life* so she has a deep relationship and expertise around Teresa, and Jim and I are both excited about this discussion.

Before we get started, let me tell you a little bit about Mirabai. Mirabai is an award-winning author of creative nonfiction and contemporary translations of sacred literature. She taught Philosophy and World Religions at the University of New Mexico - Taos, for twenty years, and now teaches and speaks internationally on contemplative practice and inter-spiritual dialogue. Her latest book, *Wild Mercy: Living the Fierce and Tender Wisdom of the Women Mystics*, was named one of the best books of 2019 by Spirituality and Practice. Mirabai is on the 2020 Watkins List of the 100 most spiritually influential living people of the world.

She lives with her extended family in the mountains of northern New Mexico, and Mirabai has been a wonderful friend to the Center for Action and Contemplation. She and Richard have a lovely friendship, and she has joined us for many conferences to lead practices and to speak. And she actually joins Jim in our online course on the Interior Castle. So, welcome, Mirabai; welcome, Jim. We're looking forward to our conversation today.

Mirabai, before we get started, I thought it would be great if you could give us a little bit of background on yourself and how you came to be someone translating Christian mystics.

Mirabai Starr: I grew up in a non-religious, Jewish household. My parents were kind of social justice activists, but not interested in Judaism as a spiritual path but more as a kind of model for activating in the world on behalf of people on the margins. So, I grew up with that consciousness around Judaism, and it was only later, in my early twenties, that I began to explore Judaism as a spiritual path. But I also grew up with the Eastern Traditions—Hinduism and Buddhism—and then eventually Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam; pretty much everything except Christianity.

And then, finally, when I was around twenty, I was living in Spain, in Sevilla, studying Spanish Literature, and I encountered San Juan de la Cruz, St. John of the Cross, and his poetry, his ecstatic love poetry to God, and it aligned very much with my Sufi practices and studies. So, I really recognized his love language.

When I began teaching Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of New Mexico, I always used John of the Cross, but especially *Dark Night of the Soul*, which had been a deeply moving text for me personally, and my students just weren't connecting with it. So, finally, a colleague of mine suggested that I try translating it. I was in my late thirties at that point, and I did. So, I began with the poem *Noche Oscura del Alma*, or *Canciones del Alma*, *Songs of the Soul*, which was this love poem that just poured out of John of the Cross when he escaped from prison for his reform activities with Teresa of Ávila.

And then from there, the Sisters, the nuns for whom he was confessor prevailed upon him to write a prose commentary, an explication of that poem as a guide for the spiritual journey. And he did. And so, there's this exquisite prose commentary that we know of as *Dark Night of the Soul*. So, my publisher actually said after that, "Look, nobody knows John of the Cross in the mainstream, maybe in the Catholic Church and scholars, and so on, but Teresa of Ávila, people are intrigued by. Why don't you translate her next?" And I was like, "Oy! I'm not interested in her. She's just too flamboyant. John of the Cross is a true contemplative like me. Teresa is just, it's all flash and fire," but I agreed to do it. And lo and behold, Teresa of Ávila became my deepest spiritual companion.

So, I translated *The Interior Castle* and at a time in my life when I deeply needed everything she had to say. And she became, yeah, really a part of my team of allies, and ancestors, and advocates that I carry with me. And then I was given the opportunity to translate her life.

So, the Christian mystics, through this John of the Cross translation, they have all opened up to me. And through them, this relationship with Christ has opened. That's the very distilled version of that journey. I hope I didn't take too long.

Kirsten Oates: Oh no, thank you. Thank you, Mirabai, that was beautiful. Today, we are going to be focusing on what you learned in translating Teresa's book, *Teresa of Ávila: The Book of My Life*, and some of the ways her life experiences led her into this mystical awakening and the beautiful teaching that we're going through in the *Interior Castle*.

Mirabai Starr: Wonderful. Love it.

Kirsten Oates: So, Jim, did you want to weigh in on where we're headed?

Jim Finley: Just a brief word about how I met Mirabai.

Kirsten Oates: Oh yeah.

Jim Finley: I was aware of her wide use [00:06:25] of her work, especially with *The God of Love*, on these kind of love traditions of God. And, likewise, it resonated with me and with these nuptial mystics in Christianity, this marital imagery for mystical union, and then Sufism, and then Bhakti yoga also. So, then Father Ronald Rolheiser invited us to come speak at his place there in Texas. They gave a weekend retreat, Mirabai and I. And it's the first time we met in person, and just developed this natural sense of affinity with each other in residence personally, along with the spiritual bonds. So then when we started the podcast on Teresa, she was a natural kind of tie-in.

And then, especially what we're focusing on today—for each of these mystics and then how it applies to us—what are the autobiographical foundations of her mystical realizations, and how the story of her life was the birthing of these insights and realizations? And then how can they be the birthing in us in our life? How can we discern these awakenings in our life? And so, that's for me the context of our time here today. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you, Jim. So, Mirabai, you're going to get us started with reflecting on some of the things you learned about Teresa, some of these key elements?

Mirabai Starr: Yes. Thank you. And thanks, Jim, for that sweet introduction and memory. You mentioned, Jim, Bhakti yoga, which is the path of devotion in the Hindu Tradition. And part of that yogic tradition and part of the Bhakti path is about cultivating an intimate relationship with a guru. And what I find as a translator of the mystics is that that's what's happening, there is this feeling of direct transmission. I hope I don't sound too woo-woo here, but in Hinduism, it's called Darshan. And in Darshan, right, you're sitting at the feet of the master, receiving direct transmission. And every time I've translated one of these mystical masterpieces—John of the Cross, Teresa of Ávila, Julian of Norwich—I have had this feeling that I was sitting at their feet and receiving their teachings as blessings, being showered with their blessings. Like, you cannot enter into their mystical language and dare to convey it without having a truly intimate relationship with them that is life changing, and that has certainly been the case for me.

So, I was thinking about when I began translating *The Life of Teresa of Ávila*, which was my second translation, I did *The Interior Castle* first, and it was such a joy; in fact, I always called it dessert. After translating *Dark Night of the Soul* and *The Interior Castle*, which are theologically so dense, and intense, and wonderful, *The Book of My Life* was just like a romp. You know, her story, that it is one of the true coming-of-age stories of a mystic that is just a classic. And I related to so much of it.

For instance, she starts off very early on by talking about when she was a little girl, she and her brother would repeat the word “forever” over and over and over again until they just catapulted themselves into an altered state of consciousness just by virtue of repeating this word. You know, you could do it with any word, you know, bubble gum, I mean I suppose, and send yourself into an altered state but by saying the word forever.

So, I've always pictured her as this little girl, maybe five, six, seven years old, and she's saying “forever,” and she begins to turn in circles holding up her arm like a dervish in the Sufi Tradition. You know, turning, whirling, “Forever. Forever. Forever,” until the boundaries of her individual consciousness dissolved into the One, and that was her first taste of mystical union. And I was thinking, “Well, I had little girl experiences like that.” That sounded familiar to me. That all of us, you know—I know, Jim, you have said this, too—we are all mystics. That is our birthright. That is, to have unitive experiences with the Beloved, with the One, where the subject-object distinction dissolves into this coexistence, what Julian of Norwich called oneing. She so beautifully invented that term, oneing, and that many of us can think back into our childhood experiences of those moments, which just reminds us that it belongs to all of us, the mystical world, that world of union.

So, I thought I would start there with our early childhood experiences, tastes, fragrances, of unitive consciousness, of love, of that all-encompassing love. And then I have a few more stories up my sleeve.

Jim Finley: I'll chime in with what that resonates in me then with Teresa. You know, when I think of my own life and how I came into all of this and what led me to the monastery; and then when I left the monastery and started leading retreats and talking to people

in silent retreats and in psychotherapy, too, it's very interesting how frequently people will elude back to early childhood moments of a certain sense of intimately realized wonder, like a realm of presence. It's pre-conceptual; that is, it's before we conceptualize anything. And it somehow opens out on trans-conceptual realizations, like this realm of wholeness. And then as we go through life sometimes, we lose touch with it.

But when we reinstate ourselves in it, in silent prayer, devotional sincerity—Jesus: “Unless you accept the kingdom of heaven as a small child, you shall not enter it.”—there's a certain childlike sincerity or a certain childlike transparency, like the sincerity of childlike devotional sincerity is the gate of heaven. And then how do we integrate that sincerity into our adult experience and deepen it, and so on? So, I think she's just touching on something for all of us to look back to these moments that maybe we lost touch with along the way. And she's reminding us, look back to these kind of foreshadowing's that were precursors to our present path that we're on and how mysterious that is for all of us.

Mirabai Starr: I love that that's the first thing she tells in *The Book of My Life* on page five or six, or something, because what's happening—by the way, with *The Book of My Life*, I think I should mention that it wasn't [until] like at age forty-five, Teresa suddenly decided that she wanted to write her memoirs because she'd had such an interesting life. In fact, a lot of the interesting part of her life happened, in my mind, after the age of forty-five, but the Inquisition insisted that she document all of these seemingly unorthodox visions, and voices, and raptures, and ecstasies that she was having. And that coupled with her blood being tainted by Judaism, known to have come from a converso family, a family forced to convert by the Inquisition in just the generation before, this was a document of her experiences to prove that her experiences, in fact, were gifts from God and not tricks of the devil, or artifacts of mental illness, right? This is an actual document for the Inquisition. And they asked her to go as far back as she could remember, to start telling what these experiences were. And that was her first one, and she went that far back.

So, yes, I think you're right. I think many of us can remember those moments, those pre-cognitive, unitive experiences and they started us on our path whether there was a long delay or not, but how do we integrate them into our adult experiences? So, yes, I just wanted to mention that this was how this book was written, it was a vow of obedience. She had to write it.

Kirsten Oates: Mirabai, do you know how long it took her to write this one?

Mirabai Starr: Well, she wrote everything so fast. I know *The Interior Castle* was written in like three months, right, Jim?

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, yeah.

Mirabai Starr: Something like that. Looking up, you know, there's that famous painting of her looking up, not even looking at the paper or parchment, or whatever. But I think *The Book of My Life* was also fairly quick.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Mirabai Starr: She definitely wasn't known for editing herself, so that's why she has translators. I took it upon myself to edit a little along the way. Although I love the digression she makes in both of those books, you know. I don't know about *The Way of Perfection*. I'm not as familiar with it, but in *The Book of My Life*, in the Interior Castle, she goes off on these delightful tangents. And then she says things like, "Whoops." I mean, she doesn't say, "whoops" but that's basically what she's saying, like, "Oh, I certainly went off on a little journey there. Let's see if I can bring myself back because I've completely forgotten what I was talking about." She's so human. She's so human. That's what I love about her. And that's what I think so many people love about her and what we can all relate to, especially women, is this uniquely unleashed, feminine, warm, intimate, practical, grounded, and yet ecstatic kind of mind and heart that she has.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It really shows her trust in God and her trust in her experiences because she was being tested and the consequences could be terrible for her if people didn't believe she was truly having these experiences of God. And so, the fact that she wrote so quickly, that she was just vulnerable and honest about what was happening for her, just shows a level of trust that was deep and honest. And that obviously came through to the people who were testing her.

Mirabai Starr: Yes, it did. They all fell in love with her and became her students, I think, the inquisitors. But you know, the other thing about that, Kirsten, I'm so glad you brought that up, is that her truths, her experiences were self-verifying. I mean, she'd like to just do what the dudes told her, but the inner authority was stronger. "Sorry, guys, I am subjecting all my own experiences to the laser of self-inquiry. Like, you don't even have to bother with this interrogation business because I'm already doing it myself." She had a fierce mind, too, where she really grappled with every one of her mystical experiences to winnow out the truth.

Julian of Norwich, also, her authority came from Christ appearing to her and giving her these revelations. And she said, "I always have been a faithful daughter of Holy Mother Church, and I would like to just believe what they tell me, but sorry, Christ told me differently, and that's my authority," that inner authority, that inner relationship with the Divine.

Jim Finley: I was going to say something else about Teresa, all these classical mystics, also, is this delicate balance of these themes that we're raising. So, for example, there's this kind of openness to these first child-like premonitions, or tastes, that we carry forward. But at the same time, then integrating it into mature understandings that we don't stay back there in immature, even sometimes infantile articulations, but we don't break the thread of the original simplicity either, as we go forward. She always has that balance about her. And the same with the masculine and the feminine. As a woman mystic, there is this feminine, this anima, this female thing. But you also see in Teresa very strong animus, male presence.

There's a story about her where she had to always raise money for the foundations. And she's meeting with one of the bishops, I think, or somebody. And she drove a hard bargain, getting them to get the money. And when they walked out, one said to the other, "She

should have a beard.” That is, she has more machismo than we do. She has a lot of chutzpah. And so, there was this deeply feminine, integrated animus about her, and there’s that balance for all of us. You know, the integration of the anima and animus in all of us as the integrated human being in the divinity that incarnates and transcends both, like that.

And, thirdly, also about the church, is that she listened to this voice, which is the prophetic voice of the mystic, this original fire of the unexplainable. But at the same time, she was always circling back that everything she said was true to the spirit of the Catholic Tradition. She never broke with it. But at the same time, she didn’t stop at the level of dogmatic definitions, but saw dogma as metaphors for mystical realizations through the Sacraments, through prayer.

Thomas Merton does this, too. You see this with these mystics. They’re always trying to be true to the essence of the Church. But the essence of the Church prophetically goes deeper sometimes than those who hold the authority within the Church. It’s like with Jesus, a lot of the arguments people had against Jesus was the authority of the Pharisees, and they kept quoting Scripture to him. And so, Jesus was always true to the essence of Torah, to the essence of the prophets that prophetically transcends these locked-in things. And I think Teresa holds that nice balance on all three of those, which are lessons for all of us, I think.

Mirabai Starr: Yeah. Beautiful, Jim. I agree.

Kirsten Oates: Before we move on from that first point, I did just want to note, I think both of you talk about like finding your teachers—and I love Mirabai, you’re talking about the community of teachers and ancestors that help us kind of connect into our own experiences. And I know part of my childhood experience was to live—my father was bipolar—a very challenging childhood dynamic. And so, my memory is not so much of these beautiful, wondrous experiences, but through diving deep into Jim’s teaching, finding God in the midst, when I look back, sustaining me in ways that I didn’t connect to at the time, but can connect to quite deeply looking back. And so, sometimes the early childhood experiences, the presence of God always there, depending on what your starting point is, Jim’s been a great teacher for those of us who started with trauma.

Mirabai Starr: Yes. Yes. Thank you for making that point, Kirsten, because not everybody has the privilege of wonderment in their childhood.

Jim Finley: Where the wonderment’s mingled with sadness and terror, there’s like an alchemy for some children. It’s also interesting with Teresa in the sixth Mansion, she talks about the traumatization’s of unconsummated longings and being misunderstood, as if somehow deep suffering is woven right into the alchemy of the path. It’s just how and when each of us experiences that alchemy is unique to each of us. And so, it’s another thing about her, I think.

Mirabai Starr: Yes. Beautiful. And, of course, the sixth Mansion or Dwelling, la morada, is the precursor to total union.

Jim Finley: That’s right.

Mirabai Starr: What do they say in Sufism: “The lions at the gates get fiercer the closer you get to home,” or

something?

Jim Finley: Yeah. Yeah. [music]

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

Mirabai Starr: I was thinking about her first vision. So, of course, everyone, I'm sure, listening knows that one of the things Teresa of Ávila is most known for is having these visions, visions and raptures and ecstasies and the locutions, voices. And one of her first visions was of Christ's hands. And my friend, Father Bill McNichols, the iconographer, was my reader for all my translations. I would give them to him because he is a Catholic priest, and I am a Jewish-Sufi-Buddhist-Hindu pagan. And so, I needed a little of just somebody who understood, and he loves the mystics and knows them deeply, so he would read everything.

And when I was translating *The Book of My Life* and he read this section that I call, *His Hands*, which is a revision of *Christ's Hands*, he wrote an icon or painted an icon, but, of course, it's called icon writing, of Teresa. I have it on my altar, a shrine upstairs. And it's an image of Teresa. You can look up Father Bill art, or something, if you Google it, you'll find it. So, I have the original picture of Teresa beholding Christ's hands with the stigmata. And it was because Father Bill was so deeply moved by this story that he had to create this icon, to my great fortune.

So, what was the vision? The vision was of his hands and with the accompanying message that in his infinite mercy, he understood that she could not handle his entire glorified form all at once. So, the first time he revealed himself, he just showed her his hands. And that was an act of generosity, of kindness, of mercy. And then it helped sort of prepare her for a full vision of his entire glorified form, as she says. And there's something about that that's so tender. And I saw it through Father Bill's eyes, the fact that he was moved to tears by that experience that she had. And so now it moves me, and I wonder how that all the places in my life, where I wanted very much to eat the whole enchilada at once, but that's not safe or healthy. I had to do some work, also, before I could grow my capacity for certain kinds of unitive experiences. And that the Holy One is kind of co-creating with us, the conditions in which we can experience union. That we're in this together, that it's this beautiful blend of rigor, discipline, and grace, loving grace. So, that's the seed I want to plant with that story.

Jim Finley: That's really lovely, connotations for me and Teresa on that. A couple of things: one, when you think of her visions, ecstatic visionary with visions, I always look for ways of how can we understand our touchstone with that? Because we might say, "I don't have visions." But, you know, in a way, there's another way of looking at this, too, in which dreams are visions. And dreams are often visions of reality, that is, it's a story, it's a vision, like an image. And by decoding the meaning of the story, it reveals us to our self. And so, in a way, the art is like a visual mystic, the artist brings out into the open something they interiorly saw, and sitting in the presence of the art, they help us to see it too. So, it's almost like the visual artistry of God through images.

And she's getting this kind of graced intensity of this mystical imagery, but there's the continuum where all images are images that are granting's of the Divine in visual form. And, likewise, with locutions, we might say, "I don't hear voices in that sense." But sometimes we

can be with someone we love very much who's in pain. and we say something that's helpful, but we don't know how we knew how to say that. And so, there are inner locutions, there are inner granting's. And I think she's helping us, if we calibrate our heart to a fine enough scale, we can see the mystical intimations of these things in our own interiority, like that. And so, I think that's a helpful thing.

And, also, another thing about the hands—I'll say this as a therapist first—when you're working with a trauma person, they were overwhelmed. And the therapist may see very clearly where they need to go and what they need to feel, but they can also be traumatized if they get to the trauma too fast.

And so, the therapist is a kind of guardian of the process to incrementally expose them to but, likewise, it's also true there's a joy we cannot yet bear. And so, sometimes there's this kind of conversational unfolding, where the infinite wisdom of tenderness gives us a peak through a crack in the door. So, once we internalize it and get the glow of it, then we're open for more. And even when we are overwhelmed, as we sometimes are, she talks about this, we're overwhelmed, we realize we're being lovingly overwhelmed, like we're being watched over. And so, how can we join God in this kind of graced tenderness, where our finite heart is being transformed into this infinite love? And she's brilliant at that. Because if only you could sit with her in person and talk about these things, you'd be in good hands. You know what I mean? You'd be with this very, very safe person.

Mirabai Starr: Oh, so beautiful, Jim. I love that.

Kirsten Oates: What I reflect on as I'm listening to the two of you is just building a sense of kind of patience for the graced path, that there's a kind of patience required. But I like the story of Teresa because when the breakthroughs come in the midst of the patience or the devotion, that they come at the right pace, at the right time, and in the most helpful way. And I think a lot of the spiritual path for me has been building the muscle of patience and letting go of where I would like to be and what I would like to be able to achieve or be in the world.

Mirabai Starr: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: Mirabai, next reflection you have?

Mirabai Starr: Eating partridge. So, there's this famous apocryphal story, I don't know, a story about Teresa, where I think the group of sisters and maybe a couple of priests, or one anyway, have come back from one of their expeditions in Spain by donkey cart during the Reform period when Teresa was founding these monasteries for men and convents for women in the Discalced Carmelite reform tradition that she was creating. And they came back, and it was late, and everybody was tired, and one of the sisters came down to the convent kitchen at night after this journey to make a cup of tea. And there was Madre Teresa, Mother Teresa sitting at a bench in the kitchen, just tucking into a roasted partridge that someone had brought to her. And she was just eating with great gusto, and the nun was rather scandalized by this because she felt like eating should be done very modestly.

And she said, "Oh, Mother, excuse me, I didn't realize you were eating and with such gusto." And Teresa could tell that the sister had a judgment about this. And Teresa slapped her hand down on the table. And she said, "Hija, when praying, pray. When eating partridge, eat

partridge.” And I love that so much because it shows Teresa’s earthiness, for one thing, that non-duality that Jim, you’ve spoken about with her, there’s non-duality in action. She does not make a distinction, a formal distinction between contemplative prayer as a prescribed spiritual practice and life. It’s that Jewish part, l’chaim, life, everything is holy—food, sex, inebriation, it’s all sacred. And, Richard, of course, talks all the time about panentheism and every particle of creation being imbued with holiness. And Teresa, I think, embodies that. She also famously said, “God lives among the pots and pans.”

And I think a lot of people, especially women, are so grateful for those kinds of partridge stories and the sayings like, “God lives among the pots and pans,” because it blesses our ordinary experiences, the very ground of where the Holy reveals itself. And the other thing about the partridge story, of course, is about one-pointedness, about showing up and being fully present, whether you’re washing the dishes, or singing hymns, or receiving Communion, or making love, if we can be present for, maybe not all, but most of our life, our activities, our relationships, then there is an opportunity for every moment to be a mystical encounter of some kind.

Jim Finley: Yes. My first thought listening to you is that it’s interesting for Teresa when she gets to the seventh Mansion, and she uses this image at the end of the sixth Mansion on spiritual betrothal, where there are two candles burning—

Mirabai Starr: Yeah, I love that.

Jim Finley: “Here’s God’s candle, and then here’s your candle.” So, she says in spiritual betrothal, when in optimal conditions, in prayer the two flames touch and they’re one flame. But when there’s distraction, when there’s hardship, they separate. She says but in the seventh Mansion, it’s not like that anymore. And she said, it’s like the rain falling from the sky into the river. And you can’t tell the water that fall from the sky from the water in the river, and you and God can’t tell each other apart from each other anymore. What you discover is the divinity of the intimate immediacy of the concreteness of life itself is holy. Gradations of holiness are really gradations of our awareness of that. The more we’re liberated from those limitations to just being transformed in love, the more we see the all-abiding constancy of incarnate infinity in the ordinariness of life itself. I think that’s a big, huge lesson.

Mirabai Starr: Beautiful.

Kirsten Oates: Do you think she would say part of the way you learn to eat partridge is through the prayer and contemplation, like, it’s the rhythm of the devotion and the practice that allows you, or helps you, supports you getting to that place where now I’m really eating partridge. I’m fully present to that moment and the holiness of it.

Mirabai Starr: That is so insightful, Kirsten. That’s exactly right, I think. I mean, I suppose you could have that ability to be present, cultivate that kind of presence, that mindfulness, that heartfulness, without a contemplative practice, but it really helps so much to be able to. For one thing, right, when we’re sitting in contemplative prayer, centering prayer, meditation, whatever we may call it, we learn the nature of the mind and the “turmoil of thoughts” as Teresa calls it, and we’re not as likely to take those distractions seriously, to buy into them, to believe everything we think. That certainly hones our capacity for being present. Yes.

Jim, can I read, you guys, can I read that tiny passage you were just talking about from The Interior Castle where Teresa talks about union?

Jim Finley: Yep.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, please.

Jim Finley: It would be good, yes. Please.

Mirabai Starr: I can't remember exactly where, but it's at the end of the sixth Mansion, I guess, of The Interior Castle:

"[But] in total union, no separation is possible. The soul remains perpetually in that center with her God. We could say that the other union--" Okay. Right. She's talking about the seventh Dwelling and the consummation of the spiritual marriage. But prior to that there are the intimations, are experiences where you would go in and out of these unitive spaces. We could say, she says, "--that that other union is like pressing two softened candles together so that their twin flames yield a single light." (This is my translation so it might be a little unfamiliar to you.) "Or we could say the wick, the wax, and the flame are all the same. But afterwards one candle can easily be separated from the other; now there are two candles again. Likewise, the wick can be withdrawn from the wax."

"The spiritual marriage, on the other hand, is like rain falling from the sky into a river or pool. There is nothing but water. It's impossible to divide the sky-water from the land-water. When a little stream enters the sea, who could separate its waters back out again? Think of a bright light pouring into a room from two large windows: it enters from different places but becomes one light." I love that passage.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Beautiful. That's beautiful. I like it also. I'm thinking of Meister Eckhart speaking of this unitive state. One of the commentators says Eckhart's trying to help us realize what happens when you encounter the same; that is, everything's the same. That is, without God it's absolutely nothing, but in the truth of things, it's God's manifested presence. Through this transformation in love we fall into that divine field of the divinity of the immediacy of everything intimately realized. I also like how she says at the very end of this state she's talking about, she says for such a person there's only one question left. "How can I be helpful?"

Mirabai Starr: Yes, exactly.

Jim Finley: It's a beautiful way to end. That's a beautiful way to end. She circles back around, she's in this sublime seventh Mansion mystical marriage state, and for such a person, "Can I help you with the dishes? You seem troubled. What's going on?" Because she sees that the incomprehensible stature of the smallest of things is God's presence. She's supple. She moves with the flow of that. That's a lovely thing to—

Mirabai Starr: It's action and contemplation.

Jim Finley: Yeah. It is.

1 This is from pg. 269-270 from Mirabai's translation of *The Interior Castle*

Mirabai Starr: Once you've had union, the only thing that makes sense is to offer yourself in service to the world. And that's when her visions stopped, too. All the supernatural phenomena fell away, and she didn't need it anymore. She got on with being of service and her reform movement.

Jim Finley: That's right. They say that of Buddhism, too, that these experiences stop. But I think it's because you realize now the concrete immediacy of everything is God's vision. That is, God's dream is the intimate immediacy. You don't need a vision over a top of that, like a heightened thing, it's the divinity of the immediacy of that and there's no need for another layer of something over or above the infinity of the ordinary. It's like God in all directions, concretely. I also think people listening to these podcasts, that the very reason they're drawn to this means they're already on the path of realizing this. That is, in this arc of transformation, the very fact that such language speaks to us means we're already being interiorly led along this unitive path. I think that's an encouraging word for all of us, for everybody.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmatively). I always feel when we have these conversations about someone like Teresa, where there's a bit of a bait and switch because you feel like you're entering in this amazing truth and beauty beyond, beyond, beyond, and there'll be no suffering, and there'll be no--, then suddenly where they land is deep in the suffering of the world, active, being mistreated. She was mistreated by the Church. I think there's the aspiration, for me personally, this aspiration of the beauty, the truth, and the oneness. But then, also, how can I build in the knowledge that actually it's what's happening in the world, the suffering in the world, that connects me to God, as well, and so to not lose sight of that.

Mirabai Starr: Yes. Beautiful. Beautiful.

Kirsten Oates: And Mirabai, to go from this unitive consciousness then back out into the world, Teresa obviously had a great analysis. I mean, she put a lot of effort into analyzing what was happening in the Church, looking at where suffering was taking place. There was a lot of hard work around knowing what justice was required. Is that right, in the way she approached it?

Mirabai Starr: Yeah. She certainly didn't use any of that kind of language, nor did she ever refer to the fact that the Inquisition was causing great suffering to Jews and Muslims. But there was this sense of that her own suffering was integral to her path of awakening and, therefore, to the service that she was offering to others, that was rooted in an understanding of the human condition being aligned with the Buddha's first noble truth of life being characterized by a series of disappointments and disconnections. Teresa herself, as you alluded to, suffered greatly at the hands of the institutions to which she belonged, and felt deeply misunderstood most of her life.

It's interesting. There was some scandal when she was around sixteen, which is why her father sent her off to a convent. Her mother died when she was twelve. Her mother died in childbirth with her ninth child at the age of thirty-three. This is what Teresa witnessed. At that point she gave herself over to Mother Mary and said that Mary appeared to her and said, "I will be your mother now." That gave her great comfort. But there was this deep, radical loss at a young age. And she, like many teenagers who are—oh, what would it be?—untethered, she became a wild child and she did all kinds of things. Her father could not

control her, her father, who adored her. And at one point there was something scandalous that happened. The scandal could be anything from walking in the garden unchaperoned with a boy to losing her virginity. We really don't know what happened.

But later in life when she's just being battered by the Inquisition and by the church and by the bishops, and there are all these accusations—I think she's already in her sixties maybe, Jim, at this point?—she's being accused of all kinds of ridiculous things, sexual misconduct, things like that. She just laughs it off. She says, “You guys can say whatever you want about me. Nobody's even mentioning the true sins of my youth. If they only knew what I actually had done, these stories would just be nothing.”

But what I wanted to say about the suffering, this question of the human condition that Teresa so beautifully models, is that I think many of us—Jim as a therapist I know this will resonate with you—I think for many of us, as you said, trauma is intermingled with glimpses of the holy. Grief and loss, which we all experience, and right now in the time of COVID and the time of Black Lives Matter, resurgence of this awareness of justice and injustice, there's this opening, this portal, that is making itself available to us, where we can recognize that intermingling of suffering and the sacred.

In Teresa's life, the deaths of her parents were hugely significant to her. First, the death of her mother when she was twelve, that probably launched her into her spiritual path, really. Then, she was very close to her father. When she joined the convent at eighteen and took holy orders, her father was in despair. You know, because it's, you might as well just have dug her grave because it was a cloistered monastery, I mean, convent. And he wouldn't really get to ever be with her again, except through the grill.

But then he became her most devoted student of contemplative prayer. Her father did. He studied with her and she taught him the path of mental prayer, of contemplative prayer, and he just flourished in this practice. Then when he died, Teresa felt nothing. I mean, she was sorry that he was gone, but she had no actual emotional experience, she says, in *The Book of My Life*, around it.

She judged herself for that as she often judged herself for her lack of emotionality. Do you know that, Jim?

Jim Finley: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mirabai Starr: She just, right, and the sisters, she would see them bursting into tears in the chapel and she would just think they were ridiculous and that it was emotionality and it wasn't real spiritual feeling. It was something more superficial. But then finally when she had that, what they call her second conversion in the convent hallway when she encounters the statue of Christ and accidentally catches his eye and perceives this unconditional love intermingled with the suffering. It's Christ being scourged at the pillar and breaks her open.

Suddenly she's prostrate on the floor of the stone floor of this hallway at the feet of this statue, and she's weeping, and she's weeping tears of decades, really two decades of spiritual aridity from age, say, twenty to forty, in the convent when she felt basically nothing, including her father's death. And then suddenly the flood gates open of love for Christ and feeling his love for her, and demanding in her typical bluster that, “I'm not moving until

you can promise me, dude, that you will never let me stop loving you like this.” And in that opening of love—and he kept his promise for the rest of her life—in that opening of love, she was finally able to feel her grief for her father’s death again, and all the losses, the health challenges, and the injustices that were foisted upon her in her life.

And so, sometimes the one grief or one experience of loss, or one experience of the heart being disarmed, will allow for, I know as a therapist you’re very aware of this Jim, and probably in your own life, too, as I am, all the other losses, all the other sufferings are all present, and we’re able to feel them and transform them through love in those moments.

Jim Finley: Yes. Lovely. I want to chime in with that, too, another insight through Teresa and then to us about the alchemy of love and suffering. For all these mystics, and this is true of all the world traditions, the mystics teach that the, if we think of trauma as a wound, a source of suffering, that the day-by-day experience of our self in ego consciousness, we labor under a traumatized state of the traumatized capacity to live in habitual consciousness with the all-sustaining love giving itself to us as every breath and heartbeat. That’s the one thing that is happening is this love pouring itself out as our body, as our life. It’s the fact that we’re exiled from that. And so, in the Christian Tradition as original sin, not as a blight on the soul, but as exile. In Buddhism, it’s ignorance. For Jesus, it’s blindness: “You have eyes to see, and you don’t see.” It’s in that exiled, blind state that fear arises, and confusion arises. And then we act it out on all the traumatizing things we do to each other.

What happens for Teresa, I think, is in the mystical depth dimension, is the healing of the primal wound of this constancy and love that transcends the darkness of this world. But it transcends it by heightening our compassion for it. It moves us to touch with tenderhearted compassion, the wounded places in our self and others but grounded in a peace that’s not dependent on the outcome of our efforts because it’s the peace that’s not dependent on anything, you know. It’s in the holiness of the encounter of liberation, incarnate as caring. I think that kind of balance is another delicate thing about Teresa and having our heart broken open by love.

We’ve been rendered whole by having love broken us open so we can no longer live on our terms, we live on love’s terms. And in being broken, our heart’s poured out towards our self, other people, all sentient beings, as the Buddhists would say. I think that’s true of all these mystics. You see that paradoxical alchemy of the vertical depth dimensions of suffering and love and how it is healing that, heightens our sensitivity to all suffering, but in a peace not dependent on our efforts to remove it because it’s not dependent on anything. It’s the love of God that sustains us all unexplainably, come what may. I think that’s another insight through Teresa too.

Mirabai Starr: Beautiful.

Kirsten Oates: It strikes me that movement that you described, Mirabai, from being very judgmental about herself, even her lack of emotion, her lack of grief, how judgmental of how she was, and then in that moment in the release and the grief, she drops into a depth of compassion, but drawing from a source of compassion beyond herself. And I do think we can be so hard on ourselves and cut ourselves off from that compassion by those voices and judgments. And so, how to find those moments to let go of that for a moment and let love in?

Mirabai Starr: Beautiful. Yes.

Kirsten Oates: I'm also struck, Mirabai, when you were reading from *The Interior Castle* and the way Teresa used just these beautiful examples--water, light, fire, the silkworm and the butterfly—and, I mean, she was really brilliant at offering insights into things that are so hard to explain through what she could see in the real world.

Mirabai Starr: Yes, she was very sensual. To me, this is a certain kind of feminine wisdom that she was very grounded in the body and in sensory experience. Yeah. And I mean, even when she came up with the four waters of prayer in *The Book of My Life*, which she then later expands on and in *The Interior Castle*, when she wrote about that, she just burst into—these are these asides that I was referring to—she bursts into this squeal of delight on the page where she says, “I have never come up with something so perfectly to describe the experience of the path of prayer.” And she delights herself with the images that she comes up with, even *The Interior Castle* itself, that vision of the soul as this beautiful, radiant, diamond-like place that is the most beautiful place in all of creation.

So, of course, the Holy One would choose to dwell at the center of that gorgeousness. And all of these things are, these metaphors are very vivid. In fact, there's a place in *The Interior Castle*, I think, or I can't, might be in *The Book of My Life* where she says, “I feel sorry for people who don't have images of Christ, and Mary, and the saints in their lives because these pictures are my windows. They're my doorways into an intimate connection with these beings.”

My friend, Father Bill, tells me that there was another backstory there where John of the Cross, who was very much a non-dualist, convinced Teresa that she was too attached to images and that she should take down all her pictures and just try to have a direct connection with the undifferentiated reality of God. And so, she did, and she lasted a day and then she had to put them all back up because she felt like she was betraying her Beloved by stripping away these images. She understood that they were not the ultimate, they were fingers pointing at the moon, as they say in Buddhism and not the moon itself.

But she also says, I'll try to wrap it up here because I could go on forever, but she also says that when she was in prayer, she liked to have a book with her. Right, Jim, you know this? She liked to have a book right next to her. She said, “I didn't even have to read it. Although reading it would help me then recollect the Prayer of Recollection, recollect myself so that I could be with the friend or the Beloved in the interior of my soul.

But so, I'd read sometimes, other times I didn't need to read. Just knowing it was there would help collect my consciousness, my thoughts to that one-pointedness where I could be with God.” So, she was a cataphatic mystic, and John was an apophatic mystic. And yet they met. In my new book, *Wild Mercy*, I kind of talk about this Möbius strip of duality and non-duality, or cataphatic and apophatic, that mystics are both. They're grounded in life experience and all of our particular incarnation and embodiment. And that becomes, as you said, Kirsten, earlier, about contemplative prayer becomes the way to experience God in everything, back out off the cushion and in the world. So, it's this beautiful feedback loop that I think Teresa embodies very elegantly.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Did you know that story about John of the Cross, Jim, telling her to take the pictures down?

Jim Finley: No, I didn't know that one. You know what's interesting, too, what Mirabai is saying is that if the apophatic is the hiddenness like the night, we find our way to God through a passage, through a dark night or a night lovelier than the dawn. And then the cataphatic is this manifested water, like the transfiguration or the light that manifested divinity. Wherever you have one, the other is always

there. So, for example, Teresa says in the sixth Mansion, in these deepened ecstasies and raptures of the sixth Mansion, God shows the soul's treasures, and she says the treasures you know intimately in seeing them, but after the ecstasy's over, there are no words for the treasures that you know. So, she's always aware of the hiddenness of the manifested.

Likewise, when you read John of the Cross, the sensuality of the encounter with Jesus, the night that turns the lover and the Beloved into each other, you see that cataphatic love mysticism, it's the incarnate love energy of the hidden. So, it's interesting with these mystics—for all of us, too—wherever you see the one, the other one's always with it because God's the infinity of the interplay of the two, the hidden manifested mystery of our hearts. And, anyway, that's another key theme, I think, for her.

Mirabai Starr: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: This brings us back to where we started, which is Teresa offers this way of acknowledging our experience beyond just what we think or what we know, but the full-bodied experience is where we find a lot of the truth and the way she brought that back through these experiences of we could watch a candle. And even in her descriptions of them, there's an experience that can happen that's well beyond a thought. It's a sense of warmth, a sense of love, a sense of something deeper, a sense of something more wonderful.

Jim Finley: I want to share a story someone shared with me at a retreat. This is a person in AA, in recovery, and her father incested her. He was very violent, and so on. And when he was dying, she went to the country where he lived. And when he was in the hospital, she asked to stay in the room with him. And so, she spent the night in a chair next to his bed and his breathing was labored, and the light was coming into the window and she was listening to her dying father's labor. And she started sobbing, just sobbing. And she said that moment with her dying father changed her whole life. And I think Teresa's trying to open us up to the, you know what I mean, like the breaking open of everything in some unexplainable way that turns you into a vulnerable, amazed, grateful person. And I think Teresa is always, she's so self-disclosing and she invites us to be self-disclosing about that part, our raw and beautiful heart, like Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche would speak of.

Mirabai Starr: Yes. That's what she does for me, for sure, is she blesses my vulnerability as holy ground, and I need that.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Well, before we finish today, I just wanted to see if there were any final reflections. I know one thing I, one question I'd like to offer, is what is the relevance of Teresa today? Because I know this is our second season of Turning to the Mystics, and in Season 1, we turned to a more contemporary mystic, Thomas Merton, and now we're turning to a more ancient mystic. How do you see the relevance of that mystic to people listening today?

Jim Finley: Should I go first? Okay, I'll go first. Here's what I think it is for me. When I was in the monastery, I was right out of high school, and I was in this cloistered monastery and Thomas Merton was my director. And we would talk about this, and I asked him if I could read St. John of the Cross. And I would sit with Thomas Merton, and we'd have a talk like this, and I'd walk out into the woods. And I had the Ascent of Mount Carmel with me, and I sat it on

the ground at the base of the tree and I opened it up and I read John of the Cross out loud. It was the same voice Thomas Merton was speaking.

You know what I mean? It's the timeless lineage of infinite love incarnating itself down through the ages like this. And now it's our turn. And so, I think the relevance of Teresa is that she's so timeless in our passage through time because it's the eternity of the fleetingness of everything. She's bearing witness to that and to live it deeply with all our heart. And I think that's the relevance for me, for her.

Mirabai Starr: Beautiful. I don't even know what to add to that. As I said in the beginning, she's so intertwined with my own soul, I can't even tease out the strands of her in me, except to say that she gives me courage to speak truth. And that's what I hope that she can do for everyone. I think that's why I'm so happy to have been able to translate her, is my translations are faithful. They're not renditions. They're not versions. They are literal translations, but they're also intentionally as accessible as possible so that I really crafted each sentence so that it would sing, and it would sing to people, like me, who aren't necessarily rooted in the Christian Tradition. I think we already established that I'm not, although I find that I have a lot more intimacy with Christianity than a lot of Christians I've met, to my surprise. Maybe that's always true for the converts, but there's this way in which Teresa transcends Christianity. And I think all the mystics do. It's said that the mystics of different spiritual traditions have more in common with each other than they do with the fundamentalists of their own tradition.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Mirabai Starr: And I think that that is true for Teresa. Teresa of Ávila, Rumi, these different mystics from different spiritual traditions are singing the same song of love in these gloriously different voices that create this symphonic resonance, I think, in all of us. So, that's one of the things that I feel for those of you who are listening who aren't exclusively Christian, you may find that Teresa speaks in a universal language of love that resonates with your own trans-religious reality.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you. And Mirabai, I've been preparing for today reading your book, Teresa of Ávila: The Book of My Life, and it's so alive. I mean, I just, I feel your deep connection and just that real aliveness of Teresa through the book. So, thank you.

Mirabai Starr: Thank you for that. That's exactly what my prayer has been, that you feel that aliveness of her on the page.

Kirsten Oates: Definitely. And it's been a treat to have you here today. Thank you so much for joining us. And this has been just a rich and beautiful conversation, and I'm just thrilled to get to know Teresa a little more deeply.

Mirabai Starr: Well, it is such an honor to be invited, to have this conversation with you, Jim, and you, Kirsten, and Corey you behind the scenes there. I feel your support and your connection to this material, too. And all of you for allowing me to join the party for a minute. So, thank you so much.

Jim Finley: And I want to thank you, too, for your willingness to join us because it's our affinity with

each other is kind of bearing witness to the affinity that resonates through all the listeners. You know what I mean? It's the kind of inner connectedness and love that we're really sharing here. So, I'm so glad you joined us. It's lovely. Thank you. [music]

Mirabai Starr: Thank you, Jim. Yes. This is a living example of Anam Cara, is our spiritual friendship, Jim, and I know that everyone can have these spiritual friendships in your lives. They are available to us and they're vital. Thank you.

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