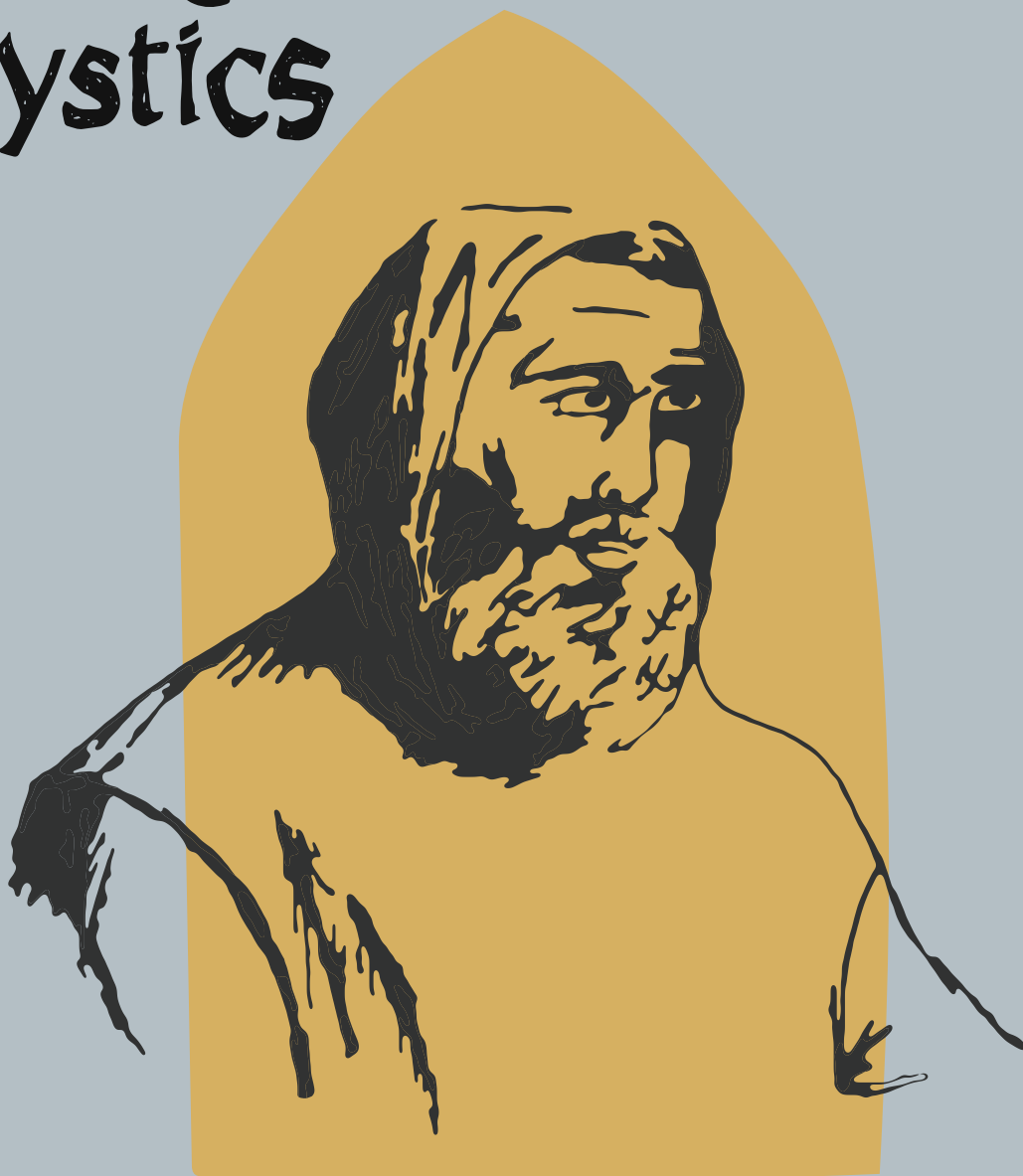


Turning to the Mystics



Guigo II

Listener Questions
with James Finley

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Kirsten Oates: Welcome, everyone, to this last and final episode of Turning to the Mystics, Season Four, where we've been turning to the mystic Guigo II and his book The Ladder for Monks. This is our final episode for this season and for 2021. I'm here with Jim.

Jim Finley: Hi.

Kirsten Oates: Hi, Jim.

Jim Finley: Hi.

Kirsten Oates: What a great season this has been.

Jim Finley: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yes. I want to say, too, to add that when we pick up again to start the next season beginning of next year, we're turning to the English mystics. We'll be going through the Cloud of Unknowing and Julian of Norwich, so we end this mystic, take a breather and start in with the next mystic.

Kirsten Oates: That sounds really exciting. I'm looking forward to that. In this final session, we're going to be going through listener questions, and you and I have had a chance to look at all the responses that came in. Some are questions. Some are compliments for you, Jim, and your teaching, and certainly, the emails give us a sense of that monastery without walls, your vision for a contemplative spiritual community forming around these teachings, so it's been wonderful to read everyone's emails, so thank you for sending them in.

Jim Finley: Yes, it really ...

Kirsten Oates: Okay. Ready for the first one, Jim?

Jim Finley: I am. I am.

Kirsten Oates: Okay. This is a question from Gary, and he says, "Given the first three seasons of this podcast series, as well as the Center for Action and Contemplation's alternative orthodoxy inviting us into the journey of descent, I find myself immediately resistant to The Ladder for Monks. What immediately comes to mind is the illusion of separation, with God being up in heaven and we humans being stuck here on Earth, and with more effort and striving on our part, we can climb this ladder of ascent to where it pierces the cloud and reveals heavenly secrets.

Jim Finley: I always find this [inaudible 00:02:25] with all these mystics. Let's say, first of all, that Guigo and all these mystics are assuming that God is infinitely and unexplainably present in and as the gift of our very presence, and Merton says, beating in our very blood whether we want it to or not, that creation, God's self donating act of creation, is perpetual and absolute, and we are the generosity of God, and the Earth, the stars, they assume that. That's the ultimate truth of our situation, and it's also true that the whole mystery of God is infinite. It's awe-inspiring. There's that sense of awe or reverence in the presence of the infinite that

is unexplainably present in and as a, there's all that, but then there's also the sense in which we're experientially exiled from the ever present divinity of each breath and heartbeat.

Jim Finley: Like, it's far off. We look around, like, where is God? Not only that, in the midst of the things that happen in life, it's especially hard to find God, and hardships and difficulties and traumatizations, so we know God is there, but, like, where art thou? That's what they're talking about. The separation is a separation in our heart. You can call it original sin, or Jesus called it blindness. The Buddha called it ignorance, so really they're addressing the perception of estrangement, and then the path is how do we close the gap of that estrangement? That's what they're referring to, and notice, from the very first step in the ladder, God's already there helping you with it, because Lexio is hearing God talking to you personally on the very first rung of the ladder, of taking the beauty of this word.

Jim Finley: Those kind of images, I think, help to correct that perception that there's this hierarchical distance, God's somewhere far off, see? Instead, God's nowhere far off, but we're somehow far off from the ever present mystery of God, and the whole path is how do I close the gap in my heart to find that union that's always there? I think that perspective helps me to see it.

Kirsten Oates: Yes, so even before we were to take the first step on any ladder, God's already perfectly present with us and loving us.

Jim Finley: Yeah, and God's already perfectly there as the mystery that you're alive.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: God's already there by endowing you with the capacity to become aware of the absence, and then in the absence to be aware of the longing to consummate oneness, and gives you the grace to put your foot on the first rung of the ladder, like God, the whole thing is infused with the gift of God. Anyway, perspectives like that help me to overcome that understandable tendency to worry about some far off God.

Kirsten Oates: In terms of thinking about Lexio, and this practice, you could think about it as a spiral spiraling down into God, or a spiral spiraling around into God. He uses the ladder as a particular example because he's relating it to the scripture narrative.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Let's say, what the mystics were doing, they're searching for a language that allows us to speak of such things, and there are temporal metaphors about time and eternity, but there's spatial metaphors. These are spatial metaphors, and one is certainly an ascent, ascending like Jesus and the Ascension. Thomas Merton once said at the monastery, after the Resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven, like going up into the heaven, and he said, "But how does the second person of the trinity go to the first person of the trinity? It was for our sake. He didn't go anywhere," and so there is that ascent metaphor, but there's also the descent, see?

Jim Finley: I mentioned this in an early talk. Jacques Maritain, the Thomastic philosopher on degrees of knowledge and the quietness and so on, he says, "The mind in conceptual thought moves in a horizontal passage through time. One plus one plus one plus one equals, and seeks to rest in an answer." He said, "But in the presence of mystery, it's different. In the presence of mystery, the mind holds still in a state of awe, and descends," he says, "As on a hidden axis of abyss-like love, as on a spiral staircase going down, and every time around, you swing

around to a deeper awareness,” so in the liturgical year, every year we come around to a deeper sense of the mystery of Christ’s birth, the mystery of Christ’s life, you know in 80 years later you cross over.

Jim Finley: You kind of go, “Wow. That was a good trip,” but likewise, in our meditation we go down and down, like deeper, deeper, deeper, and that’s Eckhart’s image, to the ground, going down into the ground, and they’re the same. They’re the inverse poetic metaphors of this incarnate infinity that we’re infinitely realizing.

Kirsten Oates: That’s really helpful, and Guigo would be just as comfortable with the downward spiral as the upward ladder.

Jim Finley: He would, because there’s a lot of patches in Guigo, in this little letter, where he talks about the depths of humility, and a matter of fact, it’s to the extent we descend into humility that we’re able to ascend into the heights. The lower we go, the higher we go. Saint Benedict in his Rule has a whole chapter on the steps to God, steps of humility, as degrees of humility or degrees of enlightenment to the deifying light, and so that’s the paradox. The more humble we come in the deep descent, the more lofty, like the lofty depths of god, are realized in our heart, those kind of paradoxical things.

Kirsten Oates: That’s beautiful. That’s really helpful to see that, and just going back to your original statement, we’re not really moving anywhere. It’s just a greater awareness of something that’s always happening.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Like T.S. Eliot, we come around for the first time and recognize it for the first time, so it isn’t that we’re going anywhere in the ultimate sense as we’re established infinitely in the infinite love of God. There’s nowhere to go, but we’re certainly going somewhere in the transformative deepening of the journey, homo viator, this deepening journey into ever deeper realizations of the one thing that’s always there, which is the mystery of love, really, or silence and beauty, all these things.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. Thank you. Jim, just building on that, there is a question from Maryanne, and she refers to the episode where I practiced the Lexio with you and I was kind of reflecting on how do I start, where do I begin, what’s the ultimate truth? She calls it, “What is my basic truth? How do I get the who right and embody my identity that lies in the fact that we are loved by God? What is my basic truth?”

Jim Finley: Yes. My sense is this. Like, what’s the basic truth, like, how do I start? My sense of this, what helps me to see it is where we start by renewing our sincerity. I think about Merton saying, “We begin when we pray that we belong to God,” so it’s our sincerity when we sit in prayer and mediation, like, “Here I am, Lord. Take me, break me. Take me to yourself.” It’s the sincerity of the desire. Now, that desire may be filled with misconceptions, but God connects the dots for us, and comes to us and illumines and guides us, so I think that sustained sincerity embodied in the willingness to keep opening oneself, the sustain attentiveness infused with love, the transformation of our attitudes in that love, those transformed attitudes translating into action, like how we treat ourselves, others and the Earth, but I would say that we always keep turning back to the beginning point. It’s like in a love relationship. Where do you start when

you lose your way? You start by the willingness to start again by renewed sincerity with each other, and love starts there.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: That's beautiful. I think, for me, when I was reflecting on that, too, it's like, you can get so caught up in the pace of life and, we talked about this, like, here I am, ready to do my practice, and so, it is that sense of, even finding my way into my own body and pausing for a moment to tap into that sincerity.

Jim Finley: Exactly. In a consumer mentality and everything's moving like this, sometimes I'll say on my retreats, something like that, you'll get a bumper sticker, mystical union or bust, or you go to sit in prayer and say, I've been at this for three weeks. Now nothing's happening. I want to go watch television. It's not like that, as we slow down, but notice something. In the simplicity of the sincerity of our practice over time, we see subtle shifts in realizations and quickenings and sensitivities and sensibilities that were unavailable to us when we first started, and when we're on a learning curve.

Jim Finley: God will continue to deepen this through time, so in one sense, it's glacial. It moves very slow, but it moves very slow with a kind of sovereignty or a kind of a depth-like sustaining presence through time like that.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: Yeah. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you. There were a couple of questions specifically relating to using scripture for the Lexio. There's one from Christina Flanagan who says, "It became clear to me that Lexio is so personally difficult because of the visceral rejection of most Bible verses. Are there other ways to access the guidance of the heart and question Lexio?" There's another one saying that, "James suggests that we read the Bible and reflect on this text to experience God's word. While I don't refute this, I wonder if it is sufficient or okay to reflect on other writings as a practice, such as Father Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations.

Kirsten Oates: There's those two asking about scripture, alternatives to scripture, because of bad experiences with scripture, and then we also have a voicemail kind of in the opposite direction asking about ways we might look at scripture differently. Do we want to hear the voicemail now? Yeah.

Listener Voicem...: Hi, Jim and Kirsten. I'm sending you a voicemail message from Tanzania in East Africa where I'm living as a priest and hermit. Here is my question. You give the example of Guigo II's reading of the story of Jacob's Ladder, and every time I hear you doing an interpretation of scriptures, it's so profound, and again, so mystical. For example, the insight about the angels. My question is, do you know of anywhere where mystical readings of scripture have been compiled centrally, or alternatively, are there any particular sources that you would point to, maybe particular mystics

or particular books by mystics that are particularly rich, having 4 or 5 or 10 readings of different pericopes of scripture, using a very mystical lens? That's something that we would find very valuable and I think would go so well with what we've been getting from Guigo II about *Lexio Divina* and the point that you made about the use of scripture. Thanks so much for what you're doing. It's extremely valuable to me, and I feel very blessed by your work as a mystical teacher helping us to access these mystics using modern language and modern psychology. God bless. Thanks again.

Kirsten Oates: This is a very international question, because one of the questions I read was from Jennifer in Sydney, Australia, and then we've got a priest and a hermit in Tanzania and then Christina Flanagan who sounds very Irish.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Yeah, and there's been some from the UK. Yeah. There are people all over. It's nice. It's lovely.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: It is. Let's start first with his question on scripture, and then we'll flip it over and look at the other side on addressing problems with scripture. Yes. First of all, let's say there's this sense of scripture as God's self-revelation to us, revealed to us, and so what we're looking for, what we find in the mystics is we find in the scriptures being intimately encountered by God in scripture, so the issue is how did the mystics read scripture? The monks chanting the Psalms, over and over, chant the Psalm, all, just the rhythmic of the chanting of the Psalms and the liturgical year, the readings from scripture, so how could we find commentaries on that?

Jim Finley: I have a few thoughts on this. First of all, I think that we learn it when we open the scriptures with child-like sincerity, knowing it is and turning to it insofar as it's given to us to do so, but how do we take that deeper, mystically? Here's some thoughts. Here's some thought. One, for example, if you take Saint John of the Cross, he's so good this way because he keeps quoting the scripture all the time, so I would say if you take the collected works of John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, *the Dark Night*, *Spiritual Canticle*, *Living Flame of Love*, and with a marker you'd highlight in red every Bible quote, and then in yellow, commentary, you go through all the works and fan it, it's scripture commentary, so by studying John of the Cross, you could see how the mystic John of the Cross read scripture.

Jim Finley: You could also see in the sermons of Eckhart, he always starts with a scripture quote. A lot of them were sermons, given some to the nuns at Strausberg and other talks, and you could see how this mystic Eckhart read scripture. That's one way. That's one way to mix it, and we kind of pick that up. Oh, I could do that. Like, I could approach it this way. The way I put it sometimes for myself is that it's to see that to understand in our heart anything that Jesus said is like falling off a cliff, because we'll never, never, never, never get to the bottom of the bottomless abyss of love that's welling up in every word that Jesus says, but to approach Jesus' words out of opinion, to approach Jesus' word out of grasping, everything he says is like a wall of sheer granite.

Jim Finley: You can't get through, and so the things to be taken by Jesus, the way that all through the Gospel was taken by Jesus and finding the words and so on. Next, there's the mystics themselves and the other mystics, too, on how they read scripture, so we can learn to follow

suit with that. Then, there's another way, is to find an in-depth commentary on the mystics. For example, when we get to Meister Eckhart, Reiner Schurmann on Wandering Joy, you see these very in-depth understandings of scripture, and then how he wove that in with the philosophical theology of Plotinus and Augustine, and Bonaventure and Aquinas and Aristotle and it always has its roots in this mystical understanding of scripture.

Jim Finley: To find commentaries on the mystics, you'll find this to be always part of those commentaries, and so I find things like that are helpful to do that, and to take the word of scripture as a mantra, like we do the readings where you say, "Fear not. I'm with you always," and so, to breathe that, like, to exhale that, we're getting close to mystical scripture in the mantra-like quality that every time you say it, the descent gets deeper or the heights get higher, so there's that. I would say there's that. The next insofar as it's problematic to read scripture because of the history with scripture. We've been hurt by dogmatic things and the scripture's been used in all kinds of ways, so what I say always with all of this, what helps, do it. What doesn't help, don't do it.

Jim Finley: If it doesn't help to do it, don't read scripture, because really notice, our main Lexio is not scripture. It's the sayings of the mystics. I keep turning to scripture because I'm trying to be faithful to the lineage, but notice, we're being faithful to it by listening to the mystics' voice who is transformed in it, and it's the mystics' voice, the things that they say, the depth of the things they say, and that becomes our Lexio, so we can listen to the thing, but not ourselves, necessarily, because it doesn't work for us. Don't do it.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: There's even a deeper step. Zen Master Dōgen, find that person whose words awaken your heart with the desire for the Great Way, then forget everything else, so sometimes it's a mystic that's not even in our own tradition. It's in the Bhagavad Gita or in the sutras of the Buddha or the sayings of Rumi and the Sufi masters, the cabalistic masters, because you can feel the resonance of the divinity, and sometimes we can approach it that way. Also, a poet, or in an art museum where the artist is a visual mystic, so we're always returning towards what works, that touches us and draws us, like that, and go with that, because our perceptions on this journey are constantly changing. Things that are obstacles right now, five years from now might not be obstacles at all.

Jim Finley: That's what counts, is I think staying faithful to where we are at the crest of the wave, as God's transforming us so internally, and let it stay open, like trust ourselves, be true to ourself. Turning to the Mystics will continue in a moment.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, can you explain what happens ... This is Jennifer from Sydney and she says, "When you've come from an evangelical background which is so word-heavy and often uses specific Bible texts to justify a particular view, I find it hard to read afresh." What's going on there? Is it just, it's so embedded in a negative context?

Jim Finley: I want to echo Richard Rohr here on this one. In a way, the protestant reformation came about as much as it did through the enlightenment, turning to reason, as it did the badly needed reform of the Roman Church, selling indulgences, and pretty horrible, really. It's a crazy lot, Catholic church, and what was reason? When Luther opened the Bible and found

God's word, we might say, for the very first time he was reading it outside of the liturgical, sacramental, contemplative, mystical, mythic, ethos of God's word, as reverberations of these poetic metaphors, this imagery, which is how the desert fathers and the mystics read scripture, and he turned to the verse as if it were a fact, and you can flip back, and have proof text, flip back and forth proving, as a theoretical model.

Jim Finley: The Catholic church, because it was also under the [inaudible 00:23:46], it joined right in with the counter-reformation. "Oh, yeah. We have our proof texts, too, you know," and the battle was on. It's enough to make God sit on a stone somewhere and weep. It's like people getting in violent arguments over the meaning and love and sort of hating each other, because they don't agree is crazy, and the story is how we are freed from the ideological living? But, you'll also find, in those protestant traditions, what we're really talking about is holiness, and you can tell, in certain ministers, certain preachers, they're really men and women of God, and they don't do that at all.

Jim Finley: I went to Fuller, which is an evangelical seminary, and you found some of that there, students would come up because they knew I was Catholic, and they would come up and they were real sincere, and they would say, "I used to be Catholic till I became a Christian." I would think, "What am I, here? Chop liver? What's going on?" That's how they were ...

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: You also found they're really deeply spiritual people grounded in the truth of scripture as pathways of prayer to God, and likewise, you'll find the same thing in the Catholic church. You have Catholic fundamentalism, flipping back and forth, and so we're kind of like Thomas Merton was saying, a lot of Catholics are losing their faith, and they're losing it in church, because the church doesn't teach its own mystical lineage, which is the living school, which are these podcasts, and so the soul knows where it needs to go to find what it needs to find, and so, admittedly, all that's there, but what's also there, if we look a little deeper, it's what we're looking for here, and finding it here, then you can see it showing up in the homily of someone where you can tell they're speaking out of this prayerful place, and I think that's what counts.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. That's so helpful, Jim. I do think, too, in our society we're so conditioned to be using our rational mind, and so if you've been trained that way with scripture, as well, it's really hard to switch that off, so I love that idea of maybe start with a poet. Maybe start with something and find your way back to scripture, if you're meant to at a later time.

Jim Finley: Yeah, and by the way, I think in listening to these podcast, the echoes of the mystic voice is liberating us from the claustrophobic rationalism because there's a certain cadence of the depth and the beauty that they're words that embody would the mind can't grasp, but which can be realized, and there's a language of that, and maybe that's one way of understanding the pedagogy of these mystics. In order to follow them, you have to leave behind that thing and move with the beauty and kind of let it have its with you and be transformed. Yeah. Certainly.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Wonderful. This is a question from Laura on the Lexio. "Is the unity of experience we seek with Lexio Divina to be in love with God? It probably sounds like a silly question, but

the example was so evocative, startling, actually, it made me re-look at agape love, mind, heart, soul, and just wonder if I should stop separating the definitions of love. I wonder if these Sunday school definitions of love actually keep me in exile., the way you have put it sometimes, from knowing God.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Let's say this. In these mystic ways, we're really talking about how the spirit is embodied in and transcends knowing and loving, see? Therefore, when we get to Meister Eckhart, we'll see the path of knowing, which is infused with love, and Meister Eckhart's knowing is much closer, therefore, to Buddhism, as knowing, but what these nuptial mystics that we're reading here, it's a love language, it is, and that's why they're much more closer to the Sufi or to Bhakti yoga, these love paths that we find in other traditions. In love, here's how I see it. Here's what led me to see it. I think it's something like this.

Jim Finley: They asked Jesus in the Gospels, "What is the greatest commandment?" That is, out of all these beautiful things that you say about God, and about God's presence, what is the one thing, that if we would ground our heart in that, everything else would fall into place? That's a great question to ask a teacher, and notice, he didn't say a doctrine. He didn't list things to believe. He said, "Here's what the greatest commandment is. It's to love God." That is, and since God is love, the scripture says, see, is to learn from the infinite love of God, how to be in love with the infinite love that's infinitely in love with you, and in the mutual self donation and love, everything falls into place, because love alone is the true substance.

Jim Finley: Love alone is the reality, and the path is all things considered, how can I learn to live by love for myself, my body, my mind, my spouse, my child, my neighbor, the animal, the Earth, to live by love? The second follows from it, to love your neighbor as yourself, because we're all sibilance of love, and so this is the difference. See, we're saved by faith, which is this obscure certainty of love in our heart. We're not saved by belief. See, the creed I believe in God, the Father of my ... Some people are so creed heavy, they can't get to the faith, but if you're grounded in this love knowledge of faith, it allows us to read the creed as metaphors of love. It's like two people deeply in love with each other and one says to the other, "I love you."

Jim Finley: The other one doesn't say, "Define your terms. You got a good book I could read on that? I'd really appreciate understanding that, hopefully with footnotes." It isn't like that. It isn't that there aren't good books on love, because there are. We have some fine books on love, but really, it's a living knowledge that then infuses, and everything they say lovingly to each other, which is their knowledge in love, is they're putting language to the love, and so we might say that all the scripture is that, or some people would prefer that all the words of the mystics are that, because you can tell it's love language, you know?

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Building on that sense of love in the Lexio practice, Deborah F. Just asked about, "Sometimes in meditation my experience with the divine is so intense, I struggle with the feeling of overwhelm," and she's kind of asking about that sense of overwhelm. What big emotions in the practice, how to handle those sorts of things.

Jim Finley: Yes. Yes. When we read the mystics, this is really true, a lot of it's hard, having trouble finding the experience of God. One person said in a question, "I don't know if I've ever had that experience." We can address that later if you want. It's an important question. Let's do, actually, do that next.

Kirsten Oates: Okay. Great.

Jim Finley: But sometimes what happens, Saint Teresa talks about this a lot in the Sixth Mansion, is the opposite is you're kind of overwhelmed by it. You're kind of like being overtaken by it. This can happen to people, and so what I think is this, is this is very personal, a contemplative, spiritual direction. At one level, pace yourself by deliberately backing away. Take a walk and make a cup of tea and fold the laundry or do something, and then when you come back, kind of ease into it and see where it goes. Also, on purpose, try to approach it at somewhat of a distance, like, just reflecting upon it or journaling, something more defused, and then as you lean into it again, the other way to do it is to give into it.

Jim Finley: It's just to give into it, because it raises a deep question. By the way, you need to be very careful with this because there's also the risk of psychotic states. You can risk ... When someone's tapped into the power of this like this, we need to honor it and pace it, and put safety first, because nothing real having to do with God happens without safety, and so we're kind of pacing ourself, getting guidance and surrender to that, and for some people, this is their way. What tends to happen after a time, sometimes it's years, it mellows out.

Jim Finley: Not because it's gone away, but because this love that was so intense has transformed you into itself, and the you that resisted it was burned away. Saint John of the Cross says a log burning in a fireplace, "It protests at first, sputters and smokes." He said, "But after a while, it just glows and you can't tell the log from the fire," and so it comes to a certain quietness, of a kind of defused oneness like this. There's another way to look at it, too, about backing away. There is this delightful realization, it's already too late. You're already ... It goes as it goes, but I would answer that first.

Jim Finley: First, safety. You keep pacing yourself, how to manage the unmanageable, like this. Journal it, see where it goes, understand it, work with it, and just hand it over to God. Ask God to help you with this and be like that. It's an ongoing, contemplative spiritual direction question, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

Jim Finley: I once went talked to somebody. You know, the Camaldolese are an order of hermits of Saint Romuald and they have a community up here at Big Sur, north of here. I once talked to someone who was a member of the community here, and I was so struck, because this is how I experienced it at Gethsemane, too, in silence. For the first time, he was in the cell, it was just a simple little cot, a table and a chair and a window, and utter silence, and in the poverty of that nothingness, it was the most profound experience of God, you know what I mean?

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Yeah.

Jim Finley: The infinite of the nothingness, like that, and sometimes you can be called to that, like that. I think the mystics were called to it, and then they were called to share with us what happened to them there, because they know how hard it is to realize such talk actually pertains to you. Like, how do we find trustworthy guidance in these different modalities of this path?

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative), and Jim, just coming back to the flip side of that question, which

was a question from Gary who finds it hard to tap into this sense of nuptial love when he puts himself in relationship to God, the Father and Jesus, that that kind of nuptial love isn't what, he can't find it. He's not tapping into that.

Jim Finley: Yeah. All this beautiful language, or this oneness, he doesn't know if he's ever experienced it. I have two thoughts on this. One is, I think I gave this in the beginning session with Merton. The image I use is that of realizing that, let's say that, in a certain sense, there really are gradients of the realization of this love, so there's that first subtle whisper of it, and it gets stronger, stronger, stronger, strong, and let's say there's a certain kind of mystical fulfillment, which is really beyond the veil of death, which the mystics experience.

Jim Finley: We might say, "I don't know if I've ever experience that effulgence, like that fullness of this, but here's the thing, and the Tao Te Ching, it says the Tao I like water. It seeks the lowest place to give life to all that lives. It's to know the fullness of infinity is infinitely giving infinity itself away, whole and complete, in and as the least taste of it, and so to know that even the simplest Lexio moment, that is the simplest moment of receiving the word of beauty and knowing that it somehow echoes God's voice, that is the fullness.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: It's really not measured in terms of the intensity of realization. It's measured in terms of the sincerity of responding to the delicacy of the way, and fidelity to that, I think, is holiness.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: Then, the gradients of that are, Teresa of Ávila says this, too, in the Interior Castle, when she starts the Fourth Mansion, she starts the mystical states, and she says, "For some people, this is their charism," but there were some people in the first three mansions who'd never had these at all and they're much holier than people that are having all these experiences, and then someone said, "Well, if that's true, why are you telling us about it in such great length?" She's, "Because, maybe you're one of the people to whom these things are happening," and how to receive guidance and how to follow this path.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative), and do you think, Jim, when I read Gary's question, as well, there's something about the nuptial metaphors not working for him, so it's like when you have that find your teacher and learn from them, it's also finding the metaphor that works for you, because they're all just metaphors, aren't they, so romantic love might not be the right metaphor.

Jim Finley: Yeah. No. Exactly right. For example, when we did the thing on Merton, remember, maybe he gives a litany of realms, so turning to see a flock of birds descending or the Earth is the metaphor. Saint John of the Cross says, "In the beginning, we can be seduced by the beauty of the world through possessiveness of heart. We get a little deeper and walking through the mountains and so on," he says, "We realize the beloved has passed this way in haste. We see tracings in the flowers and so on," and then he says, "You go deeper still," he says, "My beloved is the mountains," so sometimes it's nature.

Jim Finley: Sometimes it's intimacy with another person, nuptial.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: Sometimes it's parenting.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: Sometimes it's solitude, like a solitary wanderer. Sometimes it's a person radicalizing the poetic voice and the art. Sometimes it's the radicality of having no path at all. You just water the plants and sit on the porch and have soup, because there's something unbearably beautiful about it all that has no name, so I think that's what matters, to find where the resonance is, and just stay open to what else might happen in the future, and learning to trust that.

Kirsten Oates: I was actually reading some text from Merton about pilgrimage and how an external pilgrimage can help you find the internal pilgrimage to God, and so some people, they do the Camaldolese Trail and that's the place they find a holy, deep experience, yeah.

Jim Finley: They do, or let's put it another way, too. Another metaphor for pilgrimage, our whole life on this Earth is a pilgrimage. You so mysteriously appeared on the earthly plane, like God exhaled you onto this earthly plane, and this whole journey you're on, it has brought you up to this very moment you're even capable of being concerned about these things. Has it not been a winding path? A mysterious pilgrimage? Not of your own making, so your own life understood in this terms is this long arc, with unforeseeability that lies ahead into the moment of your death, and you'll disappear as mysteriously as you appeared. It comes full circle back into God again.

Jim Finley: It's looking at life itself as the pilgrimage.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Just looking at this a little deeper around the ideas or metaphors we have, that there was a couple of questions about God, you know the image of God and there was one question about, "I really struggle with my image of God. As a child, this image was very much a picture of an old man with a white beard standing on a cloud with light shining all around him," and, yeah. How do we understand the image of God and how it supports us on our path?

Jim Finley: Yes. I've been thinking lately, I have this idea of writing different things, but I thought of writing a little book called Theoretical Considerations. It would be like God, the soul, the self, time, eternity, death. What has been ... With God, it's like, the names of God, meditating on ... Let me just run down a list of them, and they're all true, but all of them open out onto all the others, so we go down, and this gets, also, into the masculine and the feminine and patriarchal culture. Let me just run down briefly. We can't go into all of this here, but, the first is, we might say the first is a sense of God that has no name.

Jim Finley: Meister Eckhart says an un-partable stillness, a desert, a void, and an infinite emptiness without a name, so there's that. It's the God that has no name, see, hidden, and then there's

the God who's infinitely hidden, infinitely manifested as divine relations of knowledge and love, I'm going to say in the Christian tradition, as the Trinity, so intimacy's the first manifestation of the unmanifested presence of God, [bolazzio 00:42:45], the stillness, Eckhart said, is boiling up as relatedness, as divine relations, as subsisting relations, not three individuals, but subsisting relations on knowledge and love manifesting emptiness.

Jim Finley: We can reflect on that. God is word. God is infinite wisdom. God is love. God is so on, then there's the God, [ibolazzio 00:43:08], Eckhart says, that is infinite nothingness, this infinite nothingness manifesting itself as divine relations, the Bolazzio, the activity of the infinite stillness, and then it boils over as you and me, the universe and of all things. It's the overflow of God, and so the whole universe if the overflow of God and it's nothingness without God. You and I are the overflow of God and the nothingness without God, so there's that *theoria physica*, the contemplation of the divinity of the physical world, the tree, the stone, the leaf, the night, and so on, the divinity of Earth.

Jim Finley: Next, although this is true of all things, [rara natura 00:43:54], the divinity of all things, it's true of [inaudible 00:43:58], and that we're persons created by God, and the uncreated persons of the Trinity, with the capacity to realize this, which is religious experience. We're quickened, not just human nature with the gift of reason which is culture and history and all of that, but then there's the name of God as the one who names us, as the one who's capable of awakening to this, and seeing it, and then, because love is never imposed and always offered, love is the infinite love that in an act of infinite freedom gives us the gift to infinitely choose to give ourself in love to the love that gives itself to us, and so on, by going back and forth through these names.

Jim Finley: The trouble is, we get stuck in one of them, and we get stuck in any of them in which we somehow pin it down. You know what I mean? Then, it all freeze-frames. It doesn't move, but if it's a constantly fluctuating pattern for all these that are understood and their relatedness to each other and God's infinitely more of the sides, I think that allows us to use God in that sense.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: It's like a metaphor, and this is how the mystics use, that's how Jesus, Aba, for him, and the male and the female, I think, is the patriarchal nature of culture itself. We're actually in a new epoch of growing out of that, androgynous language and male and female as a whole sexual orientation. We're in a new phase, really, of that, but always through history, it was patriarchal with men, and therefore Jesus, I forget who first said this, the way we see things now, God could have saved us so much trouble if God just would have created Jesus as a woman.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: Think of the grief it would have spared us from, and when Jesus chose the Twelve, why not make six of them women?

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: Like, what were you thinking? Like Aba, but Jesus, when he said Aba, and the patriarchal

society grabs hold of it and institutionalizes it as a patriarchal, hierarchical culture, see, and with power and so on, so the mystics helped dismantle that, really. That helped defuse that and love Jesus, God as servant, God as mother, really, [inaudible 00:46:29] and so on, and so that's how we're to see it.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: We're to de-mythologize hierarchical, patriarchal notions of the ideologies of power which the church has sinned in abundance and is emerging out of it.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: Has a long way to go, and then each of us has to emerge out of it, so me as a man, I'm to cherish the gift of being a man, because God's the infinity of masculinity. You're to cherish being a woman because God's the infinity of femininity, and the union of a man and a woman is a symbol of the union of God with us, which are these nuptial mystics, so those are some perspectives just to consider if you're so drawn to it, like carefully reflect and meditate on these and kind of see how they move back and forth with each other.

Kirsten Oates: That's really helpful, Jim, and offers a very broad insight and palette of metaphors and ways of finding God.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Michael asks-

Jim Finley: By the way, sometimes I've thought of, what if you go to see God and you're shocked because she's wearing a turban? You go, "Uh oh. Wrong hall way. Like, what's going on?" Anyway, God's great surprise, but anyway, go ahead.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: Another question.

Kirsten Oates: Michael also asked a question about God and he's saying that mystics and spiritual practitioners refer to a God that he doesn't comprehend. God is active, listening, concerned, supportive, so just with all those senses of God that you have, where does the sense of love or beauty or truth or goodness, is that the ground of all these ways of [crosstalk 00:48:27]?

Jim Finley: Yes. He has to apply what we just said to this. By the way, this is where I think we should follow, it's been given to us, so to see God as presence, like a vast, silent, abyss-like silent presence, is itself a gift, and the depth of it, the depth of it like that, and then stay with that. Stay with that and be present to that and walk with that and be with that. The other side of it is that this God who is this presence, like Meister Eckhart says, is pregnant with God, the Trinity, is pregnant with all of us, and the very activity, it is the reality of you wondering about such things.

Jim Finley: By the way, is the activity then, it's not found in God if it helps to see it this way, it's found in your being invited to respond to that, which is activity.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: It's the activity, and you're to respond to it, in a sense, by merging into the infinite nothingness of God, through humility, through poverty, through silence, so there's a strange interplay between contemplatively understood ... TS Eliot says in Four Quartets, "The stillness, but don't call it fixity." It's not frozen. It's infinitely dynamic stillness, and we understand this reciprocity in different ways, and just to sit with the mystery of it and be true to what helps you at this present moment and what gets in the way for you. Don't worry about it.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Reading, or hearing you teach on Meister Eckhart really helped me because of that sense of, no matter what it is, at the bottom of it is generosity, so no matter what modality I find God in, at the bottom of it is, or the ground of it is a sense of generosity.

Jim Finley: Or Großzügigkeit. That's right, that there's infinite ground. If we think of God as generosity, we are the generosity of God, and since the generosity of the infinite is infinite, see, and it's that generosity that's the overflowing generosity of the stillness of the presence, and also, count your blessings. Look at the generosity of, oh, the sun's moving across the sky, and just he blessings of being alive and you can't take your next breath without God. Your next breath is God's generosity, and so to start seeing everything that way, that's a gift to see that.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Have you had some construction start next door or something?

Jim Finley: Yeah. Just a little bit in the background.

Kirsten Oates: I could hear it coming in with the, when we're trying to talk about stillness and silence, in comes the ...

Jim Finley: Yeah. Right on schedule. It's not a leaf blower. They're always working on buildings around. You know, someone's building a porch or something. It's in the background. It's the contemplative life in the midst of the world right here.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. Jim, just building on what we were just talking about, there's a question from Linda about, "I'm wondering if you might have insight around the connectedness of awakened consciousness with the rise of deconstruction, especially with western Christianity." This is kind of building on what you were saying about the patriarchal nature of Christianity coming into a new epoch and being undone.

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Her question is, "Is a kind of disorder needed to awaken, to see a deeper and broader more expansive mystical life?"

Jim Finley: Yeah. Yeah. Yes. Yes. This whole movement of postmodernism or deconstructionism, in other words, in its radical form is to see that all these ideas, really all theoretical ideas of God or the human being, are all constructed. They're all constructions, and so deconstructionism is deconstructing it and just seeing everything as coming. What's that bring us to? What's that to live? I think Ken Wilber kind of puts it this way, too, is that there's a kind of relative deconstructionism, in that it's very good to deconstruct the opaqueness of the absoluteness

of these definitions which is fundamentalism, but to see that these constructions are kind of translucent, and provide a way of speaking of ineffable things, so, as we see them as poetic or metaphorical or translucent, like the words of the love letter, then it allows us to appreciate this, because it gives us a language with which to move around speak about the collective wisdom of words that echoes, but the true theologian is the one who prays, and so, but the prayer is expressing not a system.

Jim Finley: We all need a certain pattern. Even the language we're using right now, we're depending on the subtlety of systems of thought which are expressions of an awareness that transcends systems. When you think about it, the mystical experience transcends systems, because it's God, but then there's a kind of language that allows us to articulate the awareness that transcends systems, and themselves become a subtle system. The problem is the seduction of empire. Instead of leaving them subtle like poetic invitations, we turn them into fixed ideas. Let me pin this down. Let me pin this down. Anyway, that's the epistemology of all this.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. The empire does it, but also our ego likes to do it, too, because we like to feel like we know, we've got it, we've made it.

Jim Finley: Yes. Yeah. Yeah. Mystical empire.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Inside of ourselves and in the world.

Jim Finley: Inside if ourselves. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: One guy was seeing me once for therapy. He was a real scholar in a classical work. He was a real brilliant guy, but he seemed so definitive about everything, and I didn't say this to him because he was so sincere, that was his way, but I told him, "You know, if you ever lose your faith, call me. We'll talk." He was so stridently clear. Thomas Aquinas, towards the end of his life, that lovely book by Joseph Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas*, and he had this mystical experience, and he said, "Compared to what I've seen that theologica straw, and also inside of that straw you're supposed to make its bed," but Thomas Aquinas was a mystical scholar, and you see the mysticism shining through the elegance of his theology. Same with Augustine, so we're all trying to, this balance of finding words and balances that are modalities, like poetic modalities and configurations of the presence of God.

Kirsten Oates: Which are really just trying to help each one of us find it in our own experience.

Jim Finley: Exactly, and to share it.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, to share it.

Jim Finley: We want to say it. We want to share it. This is what we're doing right now. See, we're participating in the gift of sharing it with each other, but our language here has a certain quality to it.

Kirsten Oates: I have a question about that from Dave and wonders if dopamine is a part of that language. He's asking if dopamine plays a role in our desire for union with God and can we become

unhealthily addicted to seeking another moment of oneness?

Jim Finley: Let's say, first of all, there's always the physiology of consciousness. Like Dan Siegel says, "The mind is not in the brain. You cut the brain open, you won't find the mind in there, but the brain is in the mind, because we think about the brain," but what's also true is that the mind, which we're doing right now, mind, which is incorporeal, there's always the physiology of mind, which is the mystery of dementia, which is the mystery of head trauma, which is the mystery of all the variables of measurable intelligence. There's all of that. Another thing that's in the brain are neurotransmitters that transmit pleasure, and therefore there's a certain pleasure in consolations, a certain pleasure that comes in quickenings, and we can become addictively bonded to the pleasure that comes.

Jim Finley: This is why we can't wait until our next one, kind of like, in the brain, so the idea is that if that pleasure washes over us, to acknowledge it but to know it's the physiological overflow of the love that's infinitely beyond it and not to turn and try to seize upon it, because if you do, the flow stops, so you have to let it wash over you or you have to let it have its way with you. You have to do that, like the surrender of love, but not turn to try to have it or hold onto it, and not to be afraid of it either, because it's the loss of control. It's kind of surrendered over to being carried by a love, and so that physiology's always there, and the risk of being addicted to it or being afraid of it, whatever, but there's something else that's true about it.

Jim Finley: Our traditions of using hallucinogenic things to create these mystical experiences, and I would think, when they're used traditionally in the lineages in which they were used, peyote and so on, under the guidance of someone, it's very similar to the sweat lodge. It's very similar to the zen sesshin. There's very intense modes that hold us there for so long, we have these breakthrough experiences like that, but Thomas Merton said the trouble with that is, with these experiences induced by these substances, the Dionysian cult, why? He said, the trouble is, when you seek those experiences by finding God through physiology, unless there's an underlying depth of humility and wholeness, there isn't the presence to hold it, and you can get trapped in a surrogate of mystical union, so this is why the normal thing is we would not use these things.

Jim Finley: We're grateful for consolations that come but knowing they're a fleeting echo, an affect for an infinite love, and to know that unless it's under skilled training and this complicated thing, it's really risky. It's an aberration. That's why I would say the alcoholic and spirituality of the 12 Steps, that an alcoholic is a would-be mystic, because the alcoholic discovered, my problems aren't my problem. My experience of my problems are the problem and if I can alter my experience, my problems will go away. Great discovery. There's something mystical about that, so they're a would-be mystic that wandered off into a bad neighborhood and got mugged, because they got trapped in the addictive need to keep recreating the thing and dug themselves into a ...

Jim Finley: This is a delicate thing about pleasure, detachment, altering mood and that. I like the saying of the Buddhist, "There are 10,000 worlds and I've traveled through them all," or to be at home in the totality of oneself, and wander through and not cling to or reject any of them, that freedom of spirit.

Kirsten Oates: Thanks, Jim. Our last question to close, and I think it builds on this one, which is, someone

wrote in about having to balance their marriage relationship with their pursuit of union, and they find particular practices are more supportive of the union of their marriage, and I think this is a little bit getting at the dopamine question. If you're pursuing oneness for the dopamine or in a way that would exclude union with your marriage, that's probably not what God's encouraging you to do. Yeah.

Jim Finley: Yeah. The way he put it, too, I think, let's say you've been living alone, like a lay monk, and in that aloneness, your path, this union with God was there, this kind of mystical was there, and let's say you meet someone, you fall in love and you get married, and then you find the marriage and the realities of married life, the complexities of it, there's just all those things that go into being married, that person can see that the union that was there in their monk-like state is getting scattered in the complexities and realities of the married state, so the idea would be, as a person thinks this through, is to know that the married state itself is inherently contemplative.

Jim Finley: Thomas Merton said we should get down on our knees right now and thank God we can't live the way we want to. God doesn't let us get away with it, and if you're married, you can't live the way you want to. Your spouse won't let you get away with it, and so, if you each pull each other's covers, if you're each there for each other, there's something about that, and this is why these nuptial mystics, by the way, say married love is a metaphor for God, and so therefore you're to see there's something about the shared sincerity of the married relationship is itself the incarnate presence of God being given and being invited to see it in the givens of the relationship, in all its edges, you keep working on it.

Jim Finley: There's another thing that's possible, then. When you go to sit alone in prayer, you would see that your relationships with the spouse were embodiments or echoes of what's coming up in the solitary silence of your prayer. You can start to see a continuum between the two, and this is true, sometimes the spouse might not be into this at all. The spouse doesn't relate to it in that way, but as long as they're sincere and as long as they're loving, you can see a certain holiness in them, in their sincere, and you can let them know that you see it and you're grateful for them, and sometimes people who are drawn to this mystical path, they're married to someone who's also drawn to it, and then it becomes explicitly present as their marriage itself.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you, Jim, for that reflection and Octavian for that question about marriage. I thought that was a helpful one, too.

Jim Finley: Yeah. That's a good one.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Yeah. We've come to the end of our listener questions and this season, this last episode in this season.

Jim Finley: Oh, let me add one last thing.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, yeah.

Jim Finley: I want to [inaudible 01:03:52]. I don't want to interfere with ... The whole point of this is, we're meant to find it where we are, so if you're married, you're meant to find this as married. If you're divorced, you're meant to find it as divorced. If you're sick, you're meant to find it in

your sickness. In your dark, you're meant to find it ... That's what really counts, is the where we are, is we're meant to find this and live by it in the context of where we're called to live our life. I think that's the the thing.

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: Anyway.

Kirsten Oates: No. That's a beautiful place to end on, so, just inviting everyone who's listening to be fully present to where they are in their own lives and knowing that God's fully present there to be found and to find them, I guess.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Exactly. We'll end on Merton's note. The very fact you're seeking God means you've already found God, or deeper still, God's already found you, otherwise you wouldn't even be seeking God. That's a nice insight to end on.

Kirsten Oates: That's beautiful. Thank you to Thomas Merton. Thank you to Guigo II, and Jim, thank you to you, too, for a wonderful season. I resonate with all the positive feedback that we've gotten. I've really enjoyed this season and learned many new things, so thank you, Jim.

Jim Finley: Yeah, and thank you, Kirsten, for your presence to this, because so many people made a statement by listening to our dialogue, it actually helps them access it more, so I think this is another layer of accessibility to this, so it enriches it, so, gratitude to you for that.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you, Jim. See you next year. Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We'll see you again soon.