

Turning to the Mystics



Julian of Norwich

Turning to Julian of Norwich
with James Finley and Kirsan Oates
feat. Mirabai Starr

Jim Finley: Greetings, I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oats: And I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Kirsten Oats: Welcome everyone to season six of Turning to the Mistakes. I'm excited to be here to launch this season with Jim and we have the wonderful Mirabai Starr with us, who's a writer, teacher, and translator of the mystics and a wonderful friend of this podcast and has been on for a number of seasons with us. So welcome Jim. Welcome Mirabai.

Mirabai Starr: Thank you, Kirsten.

Kirsten Oats: And Jim, I'm going to hand it over to you to announce our mystic for season six.

Jim Finley: Yes. Thank you. Yes. So we've been going through this series of Turning to the Mystics. And so now this will be our first session on Julian of Norwich. And she's a contemporary in England of the cloud of unknowing, very close contemporary. So she's an English mystic with the cloud so I'm putting them together for that reason. And really one of the great women mystics in this whole tradition. And is launching this here. Mirabai and I with Kirsten, will be opening up about her life and setting the tone for her teachings. So I look forward to spending time with Julian.

Kirsten Oats: Thank you so much, Jim. I thought I'd start by asking you both about your interactions with Julian in your life and your career and how she's impacted you. You want to go first, Jim?

Jim Finley: When I was in the monastery with Thomas Merton right out of high school in the talks to the novices and with me in spiritual direction, he really introduced me to these mystics, John of the Cross, Teresa and so on. And it was there too that I was first introduced to Julian. And I read her, was aware of her, but she didn't at the time really have the impact on me that the other mystics had. As a matter of fact, I would say, I still feel new about her compared to John of the Cross and Teresa and Eckhart and some poets and so on. After I left the monastery, I was invited to England to give talks in London. And again, through Carolyn Myss, Findhorn, Scotland. And so that gave me a chance twice to be at her hermitage there in Norwich. And there, I spent a year immersing myself in her and that's the first time I think I really started to appreciate her. And then lastly, in my contemplative prayer group with St Monica's, I would spend a year on a mystic. I'd give a talk, we would do a sitting, and I got even more into her. So that's been my history with Julian. And now this podcast has given me another opportunity to immerse myself in her teachings.

Mirabai Starr: I was around the same age, actually. I was 16. I had dropped out of high school. I don't recommend that, but that is what I did. But I was reading spiritual books. Everything I could get my hands on. And I was going through a very difficult time because I was an adolescent and my hormones were raging. You know how it is. And an older friend who was a writer with whom I was actually doing creative writing exercises introduced me to Julian by quoting her famous line, "All will be well and all will be well and every kind of thing shall be well." And I clung to that saying like a life raft through the rest of my stormy adolescence. I would come back to it again and again. There was something about the rhythm of that teaching. It wasn't just like, everything's going to be okay.

She repeated it three times, very intentionally. Julian's the queen of threes anyway. She's the Trinitarian goddess. Everything is in threes in her text. And so repeating it three times had this very powerful, almost an alchemical effect on me. And I grew up in a totally non-religious family. Non-religious Jewish family. The last thing I want to say about that is years later, I quoted Julian to my Jewish mother who now quotes her all the time. Just that statement. It's so interesting how much power that carried. So many people know nothing about Julian of Norwich, except they know that beautiful triple affirmation that all will be well.

Kirsten Oats: Mirabai, how did it come to be that you translated her work later on?

Mirabai Starr: By accident, really. Which is what happened with all of my translations. I was known for translating John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila from early Renaissance Spanish into very contemporary English. And then I was approached by a publisher who just asked me if I would consider first *Cloud of Unknowing*. And I said, "Actually, there are very good translations of *The Cloud*." The most recent one that I knew of was Carmen Acevedo Butcher's beautiful translation. I didn't see any reason to add to it. And then they said, "Well, how about Julian?" And I just couldn't resist. Even though there are perfectly reasonable translations of Julian also out there. Whereas when I translated John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, there were only two translations in existence and it seemed like it was time for a fresh version. But Julian just called to me.

I had already been studying her anyway on my own. And when I began to immerse myself in her in discernment about whether or not to take on the translation project, it became clear to me that she had this vital wisdom to offer to our exact times. And this was right before the pandemic. So it wasn't even because she lived through a pandemic, a plague of her own, which we can talk about later, but it was before the COVID-19 pandemic, but I still felt like there was so much about Julian that was calling to us to pay attention to right now. That vital medicine to help us on our way in these fractured times.

Kirsten Oats: Well, thank you both for sharing about your interactions with Julian. And Jim, would you just give us a little bit of an overview of how we like to introduce mystics in these first sessions?

Jim Finley: Yes. Yeah. My approach to this is that it's very helpful to have a better understanding of who the mystic was, because that helps us to understand better who she is or who he is. So these are the autographical foundations of the timeless nature of her teachings. We'll look at this later too closer. And this is a lesson for us too. That God comes to us autobiographically. That is God accesses us in the midst of being ourselves and the walk or the path. And so I think that's why we're starting out this way with her too, and how these teachings flow out of her own experience in her life and God's presence in her life.

Mirabai Starr: I love that about you, Jim, that your teachings are so embodied. It's so much about the alchemy of our own experience. That that's our mystical relationship with the one is not despite, but completely entwined with our human experience. So I just want to acknowledge that beautiful attribute of your teachings of your wisdom.

So yeah, I think that Julian's story is really juicy. She had an NDE, a near death experience.

And it was out of that near death experience that these visions flowed. These 16 revelations of divine love, she calls them. Or showings is the other word she uses for these visions of Christ. And so on her deathbed ... And we don't know what she was dying of. But it's significant that this was occurring during the time of the plague, the Black Death that was sweeping through Europe taking down as much as 50% of the population in its wake. Estimates are between a third and half.

And so Julian lived during this time. And my conclusion as a bereaved mother myself is that Julian was dying of a broken heart. That she lost statistically half the people she knew and loved during this time. It's quite likely that she lost family members who she loved beyond measure. Maybe a husband, maybe a child, maybe more than one child. There's some research and scholarship around this. Nothing is conclusive, but it seems likely. And again, intuitively I can sense it in her when she says on multiple occasions in the long text ... I'll make a distinction or Jim will in a moment about the short text versus the long text. She says, "At this point in my life, I saw nothing left to live for." So there she is dying. Her mother is with her. This is the only autobiographical information we have about Julian is that her mom was with her at her bedside. We know nothing else about Julian, really, including her real name. Her name was not Julian. We don't know what it was. Just like Cloud of Unknowing is anonymous.

But she was called Julian as a placeholder because of the anchor hold in which she enclosed herself after she miraculously recovered from this life threatening illness and decided to spend the second half of her life enclosed in an anchor hold, which was attached to the church of St. Julian in the busy little city of Norwich, England. So she's in her bed. Everything's fading. She says that visually the entire field around her was fading. She was becoming numb. She could no longer sense anything below her neck and she realized that her breath was leaving her. Her mother quickly ran for the curate, for the local priest or clergy person, who came and held a crucifix above her face and said, "Gaze into the face of the suffering Christ and you will go directly to him. You will go to heaven."

And I always imagine for Julian that sounded like a great bargain at that point in her life when everything was so hard. And so she did. She gazed upon this crucifix, everything else faded, but this brilliant light began to stream from Christ's countenance and Christ came alive and began to speak to her and to share with her. And well, what he shared was every detail, first, of his passion. She experienced everything, including copious flowing of blood. And she experienced that as not gruesome and horrific, although it made her sad that he suffered, but rather as beautiful, warm, friendly, loving, and courteous. She uses all those adjectives to describe Christ's passion. It was like this warm, intimate, loving exchange that he shared with her. And anyway, after these visions, 16 of them unfolded, she recovered and she wrote down everything that she could remember.

And then, as Jim will elaborate on, she did this amazing thing, which was, she said to herself, "I have got to now turn inward and be with what I've been given and unpack it and contemplate it and winnow it to see what has value for others." So paradoxically, she removed herself from society, became an anchoress, but it was for

the benefit of all beings. What in the Buddhist path would be called a bodhisattva vow that she said, “I am going to stay close to the bone of this incredible thing that happened to me, this enlightenment experience, it would be called in Buddhism, for the sake of all beings. All sentient beings.” And so from there, she created what’s known as the long text. Taking that verbatim account of her visions and contemplating them and expanding on them over the course of the next 40 years. I have so much more I could say, but I’m going to pause for a moment.

Jim Finley: One of the things that I’ve found so stunning about her is she’s in the midst of this experience of dying and there’s this unforeseeable experience of God’s presence to her as the mystery of love crucified. It’s this love. This united. And so that she sees it as the suffering of Christ is really our suffering that God out of love takes upon God to be one with us in our suffering. And what’s striking to me about her is it’s like someone’s quickened in a way that you live your whole life in fidelity to the quickening. The radical fidelity of living in fidelity to that and writing it out. And then over a period of years in the long text, sitting with it as a *lectio divina* but mystically illumined *lectio divina*. So it’s a *lectio* that’s so beautiful because it’s the shining light of this love.

I think that’s where all the beauty of her words come from. They just flow out of her because she’s channeling this love and these interior locutions or these given ... So when we read her, she’s teaching us because we’re drawn into the beauty of her words and drawn into her beauty of her words, guiding us. Because we sense how beautiful it is and then in the presence of the beauty of which she speaks. And I think that’s the intimacy of turning to her as our teacher.

Mirabai Starr: Beauty, beauty, beauty.

Kirsten Oats: And so it was a miracle that she was revived after the near death experience.

Mirabai Starr: Yeah. Because nobody survived the plague. That was the thing about the plague. If you got it, you died. And so it probably wasn’t the plague, although maybe she miraculously recovered from the plague. But it did feel miraculous that being on the verge of death, she ended up sitting up and writing everything down. She remembered though ... It was interesting. I think this happens to a lot of us. Right after she recovered she went, “Oh, I remember. When I was a young woman with the passion of religious fervor on my heart, I asked for this.” She remembered that she had asked for three things from God. One was to witness Christ’s passion. The other one was to be have an illness that brings her right to the threshold of death and not beyond. And the final one was what she called the triple wound, which was contrition, compassion and longing for God. And so after she recovered from this experience, she recognized that her youthful prayer had been answered.

Kirsten Oats: Yeah. I was so surprised by that part of the story that as a child, she’d prayed for these things. Such an odd and shocking prayer for a child, to be brought close to death, but not die.

Mirabai Starr: Exactly. Maybe she was a teenager, but teenagers are a little more dramatic.

Jim Finley: Something too that strikes me about this is that I think when we're graced with the experience of God's oneness, reflectively afterwards, we're able to look back and see the precursors for that grace. Blessed John Roxburgh talks about prevenient grace. It's the graces before the grace that we don't see as the grace until the grace comes, then we look back and we're being providentially nudged towards something that hasn't yet appeared. Like an unfolding story. Like a love story. And that's what I see in this about her too. She looked back and saw that. I think that happens to us sometimes.

Mirabai Starr: Oh, I love that, Jim. And I think about that with all the mystics now that I think about it. Especially Teresa. Teresa of Avila who as a young child was obsessed with God. From her turning as a small child, repeating the word forever to going off with her brother to vanquish the enemies of Christianity, to building little churches in her garden and ensconcing herself as the priest.

Jim Finley: And look at you Mirabai, here is this young girl, instead of being so passionate about rock and roll, you were devouring mystics. Go figure. You know what I mean? It's almost like preparing the way for something unfolding that hasn't appeared yet. And I think that invites us to see things are unfolding now that haven't appeared yet. There's the crest of an unfolding wave. We're in the midst of something yet to be fully realized. I think that's true.

Mirabai Starr: Oh Jim, that's so good because we don't have to just look back on our childhood and youth. Maybe everyone right now listening is scrambling to think of the events in your life that were those nudges to mystical experience. But what you're saying that's so beautiful is that right now there are probably those providential moments that are unfolding and that it's an ever unfolding process. There is no end result.

Jim Finley: That's right. And that's why I think also what these are are foreshadowings of what death will be. Like God's great surprise party where the whole thing will burst wide open. Where in the glory of the light, we'll see the providential unfolding of things that are eternal, that never end.

Mirabai Starr: Oh, I love that. Can I read something that Julian says about that very thing?

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oats: Please.

Mirabai Starr: It just seems so perfectly timed. This is at the very end. If anyone happens to have my translation, it's at the very end. Page 223. "I marveled at this vision. For in spite of our blindness here on earth in the foolish ways we live our lives, our endlessly gracious God still holds us in the highest regard and rejoices in all we do in are. We please her most wisely ..." By the way, she uses the masculine and feminine pronouns interchangeably because Julian sees that Christ had to be female. And we'll talk about that in a moment.

"We please her most wisely and truly believing in her love and rejoicing with her and in her just as we shall one day come to live in the endless bliss of God, praising her and thanking her with all our hearts so she has loved us and known us in her boundless foresight since before time began. She created us inside this love without beginning, and she protects us within that same love. She will never allow anything to impede our ultimate joy."

Now here comes the part that really relates to what you're saying, Jim. "And so when the final judgment comes and we are all brought up to the heavenly realms, we shall clearly see in God all the secrets that are hidden from us now. Then none of us will be moved in any way to say, 'Lord, if only things had been different, all would have been well.' Instead, we shall all proclaim in one voice, 'Beloved one, may you be blessed because it is so. All is well. We see now that everything happened in accordance with your divine will ordained before the beginning of time.'"

Jim Finley: Beautiful.

Kirsten Oats: Wow.

Mirabai Starr: Then none of us will be moved in any way to say Lord, if only things had been different, all would've been well.

Kirsten Oats: What's interesting about what you're talking about in this arena of looking back and the unfolding is that the spirit ... She was taken to this very spiritual place. No one else could see it. She was in a very interior spiritual realm. But then when she awoke from that, she connected it back to just a day in human life, in the realm of experiencing herself in her day to day human life. And I find that interesting too, that we can have these deeply interior that feel in the mystery, but then they connect back in this concrete, tangible ways. So that's fascinating to me.

Mirabai Starr: Beautiful insight.

Jim Finley: Turning to the Mystics will continue in a moment.

Kirsten Oats: Mirabai, you were going to share some of her insights that you know about God and Christ that feel important to her teaching. One about the idea of the feminine.

Mirabai Starr: My takeaway. And I'd love to hear what Jim thinks and you too Kirsten. But the two radical insights that she gleaned from these visions is one, there is no such thing as sin. She says, "Sin has not a particle of substance. It is no thing," she says. "And can only be known through the pain that it causes. That's the only thing that has any ontological reality or substance." And she says, "Even that is just a passing thing. The pain that we experience from missing the mark is only valuable in so far as it increases our love for God and our humility and tenderness." So that's one radical aspect of Julian's theology. The other one is the motherhood of God, for sure. So it's really two thirds of the way through the text that Julian says, "I realized that the second person of the trinity had to be female because only a mother would do what Christ did. Would break herself open for her beloved children and pour herself out. And that's the nature of motherhood.

"And so that basically God gave birth to God's self through the second person of the trinity. That's what the incarnation is about. It's an embodied feminine reality." That's crazy. But she was in enclosed in an anchor hold, as we have established. And she wrote this text in secret. And it was kept secret by her attendant who was really her disciple, as far as we can tell who ... Julian kept it under her bed. And when she died, this woman snatched it and made sure that it was kept safe so Julian would not be defamed, but certainly in her lifetime, she was not in danger by saying these things. In fact, she says, "I tried to line up what Christ told me

with the teachings of mother church.” What she calls mother church. I really tried people, but the ultimate authority was Jesus herself. And so what could I do? It was a little different than what I’d been taught, but this was the ultimate authority was Christ. She didn’t doubt for a minute that she was being given the straight scoop.

Kirsten Oats: How long was it that her work remained hidden like that? I didn’t know that part of the story.

Mirabai Starr: Centuries. I think there was a brief appearance in the 18th century or maybe even late 17th, but then ... So Julian wrote in the 15th ... 14th century, sorry. 14th century. But then it was really not until the late 19th, early 20th century, from what I remember, maybe Jim you know better, that her teachings were really recognized as more than just an obscure medieval text that nobody paid attention to.

Kirsten Oats: Wow. And they’re so align with these other mystics we’ve been studying like Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. Yeah. Wow.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Yeah. My thought too about sin being real, first. This is so at the heart of all my mystics. I think it’s also the heart of the teachings of Jesus. Like a contemplative understanding of Jesus. That God is love. And so love alone is the substance of everything. And therefore what sin is is the absence of love. And it’s the absence of love that hurts. So we feel the effect is the absence. And that’s why the love is the cure for the pain, because it’s the true substantiality of everything, which is love. So that’s so consistent with that foundational understanding.

And also about male and female. One way to understand it too, classical, traditional, scholastic theology, Aquinas and so on, is there’s a sense and which gender does not apply to God because God’s beyond all attributes. All qualities. Is beyond. She’s beyond. But then because from all eternity poetically in the trinity, God, the father, God as origin is eternally speaking God as logos. And as eternally contemplating God in the word. And God contemplates in the word, the eternity of masculinity. The eternity of femininity.

And since everything in God is God, God’s the infinity of the masculine. God’s the infinity of the feminine. And infinitely more besides. Male and female God creates. And so you have the femininity of God because ... Meister Eckhart says this. He said, “From all eternity, God is giving birth. God, the father’s giving birth like a woman in labor. God’s giving birth to the word.”

And so Eckhart also sees the feminine as the birthing of God. We see this also in the holy spirit of Hagia Sophia and the feminine. Unfortunately what’s happened is because of patriarchal dominance the patriarchy has been bound up with empire and you get this coup d’etat of the masculine over the feminine to the detriment of everybody, including men.

So I think really part of these teachings of the mystics is this reintegrative thing by the divinity of the feminine. We see this birthing tenderness. It’s in all of us as a part of God’s nature. And it’s an antidote for a lot of the problematic aspects of institutional religions, which tend to be patriarchal in the negative pejorative sense.

Mirabai Starr: Beautiful. Well, Julian says just what you’re saying. And so this is on page 160, for those

who are interested. She says, “And so in our coming into being, God all power is our natural father and God all wisdom is our natural mother, supported by the boundless love and goodness of the holy spirit, all one God.” She says a lot more about that, but just everything she says in the following 20 pages confirms what you were saying, Jim, about this integration between all the gender attributes of that which transcends gender.

Kirsten Oats: And that would’ve been so radical in her time. That’s the thing about these mystics. Teresa of Avila, the same. The radicality of the embodied experience versus the dogmatic experience and how these insights come through the embodied experience. It’s just miraculous. It’s beautiful.

Mirabai Starr: And it’s still radical.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Another subtle thing here, I think, is this means for each of us, say as a man that I as a man in mystical awakening, I’m to transcend my masculinity as having the final say in who I am. And the qualities of the feminine, that is the qualities of birthing, the qualities of tenderness, the qualities of things. But I’m also at the same time to transcend masculinity in my masculinity because I’m a man and therefore I’m to manifest the divinity of masculinity. And so the anima and the animus like Carl Jung and so on, where it used to be this integrative male and female. And we’re to keep this balance and this love of God that transcends both, is the infinity of both but it gives itself to us as male or female with each other. Yeah.

Mirabai Starr: Beautiful.

Kirsten Oats: Do you both feel that reading someone like Julian who had this embodied insight helps us draw out those more feminine qualities? Sitting with her words and contemplating what she contemplated. Do you think that helps with that task, Jim, of bringing out the feminine?

Jim Finley: I do. And especially, I’ll say this with Julian, this is true with Teresa too and Mechthild (of Magdeburg). When I sit with Julian or Teresa, I find as I listen to the feminine energies of her awakened voice, it resonates with the feminine dimensions of my own awakening heart and it brings it forth in me. And that’s how I experience it. I do feel that way. And also look how masculine she was and that she was so forthright. Teresa of Avila is this way too. Very forthright. She was not lacking in masculine energy. For example, all due respect to the institutional church, but guess what? Jesus is ... There was a directness about her femininity. Yeah. Anyway.

Kirsten Oats: I did just want to go back to this idea of the absence of sin or that sin isn’t real. I think that’s such a striking thing to say. And Jim, you described it as that ... Did I hear you say everything is love and sin is the absence of the experience of that love? Is that-

Jim Finley: Let’s say this. Let’s say psychologically, physically, historically, sin’s very real. As the way it expresses itself in the ways we traumatize ourselves, each other, and the earth. It’s brutal. The brutal. So sin is the tangible cruelty and the pain caused by that cruelty. So it’s very real. What we’re saying is in the depth dimension of things, although its impact is real and the driving energy is real, the deeper you go, you see that ultimately speaking, it has no substance. That love is the substance. And the love is present in the traumatizing energies, which is the mystery of the cross. The whole mystery of the cross love crucified, which is

what Julian saw is this infinite love was present in transcending and fully present as this traumatizing moment, which is really God taking upon herself, our traumatizing moments as infused with love. This is why we can undergo a loss in our life.

And at the time, if it's unbearable, the loss really is unbearable. It just is unbearable. There's just some losses that unbearably, the loss is so deep. But if we don't panic, if we don't panic and walk in the loss, we can see starting to shine out through it lessons about fragility and love and eternity and wisdom. So a lot of who we are today in terms of understanding the ways of the human heart, a lot of it has come out of our own moments where everything was lost. I think it's really true. Mirabai, what do you think?

Mirabai Starr: Oh, that's so beautiful. Yeah. I mean, Rumi and so many others. Leonard Cohen, the cracks are where the light comes in. I don't think I would've designed it that way had I been God, but I am not she. Well actually I am according to the mystics and so are you.

Jim Finley: Yeah, exactly.

Mirabai Starr: So Julian tells us over and over again that love is at the heart of everything that she learned from these revelations. And at the end of all the visions, she asks the holy one what God meant by all of this. "Would you like to know?," comes the response. "Know it well. Love was his meaning. Who revealed this to you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love. Why did he reveal it to you? For love. Stay with this and you will know more of the same. You will never know anything but love without end."

Jim Finley: One echoing Duns Scotus on the primacy that we don't exist because God is, we exist because God loves us. And so ultimately speaking, one thing is happening. This infinite love is infinitely pouring itself out and giving itself away as the reality of us for love's sake alone. That's it. You see the same thing. And there's another thing about Julian that strikes me and about us too. She's so confident. And I think also as we go along in the spiritual life, there can start grow in us a quiet confidence. It's not an answer. It isn't that we still don't have a lot to learn. But there's a certainty. An unexplainable certainty in the light of which we live by. And I think that's one of the fruits that emerges in our life in this walk is ... It's an obscure certainty. It's an intimate certainty. We live in its light.

Mirabai Starr: And for the mystics, their experiences are self verifying. They're not contingent upon the affirmation or permission of any intermediaries or authorities.

Kirsten Oats: Is it right to say that she wrote the short text immediately and then many years later the long text was completed? Is that correct?

Mirabai Starr: It was not long before she moved into the anchor hold following her near death experience. It was within a few years at the most. But then she spent the rest of her life unfolding and gleaning the wisdom and reflecting on it in writing. As Jim says, and I'd love to hear you expand on this, Jim, that's what we all do. We're given these often early revelations in our lives and it takes a whole lifetime for those gifts to ripen. Ripen enough that they not only nourish us, but with which we can feed the world.

And if I may just one quick side trip I'd like to take us on. And that is the difference between an anchor hold and a hermitage or being an anchoress or an anchorite and being a hermit.

It's really important to note that Julian, yes, she enclosed herself in a cell and lived there for her entire life, which is pretty intense, but it had a window that opened out onto the city street of Norwich. And through that window, she gave spiritual counsel. So people would come to her for guidance, for wisdom. And I like to think for gossip or she would get the gossip and maybe goodies and treats they would hand to her through that window. And she was participating in community. She was not a hermit.

And the other window opened onto to the sanctuary and she would receive communion and participate in mass. And so she was actively engaged in both the religious life of her community and the street life of her community. And I think that gave her a very special access to humanity. She was not removing herself like so many of our ideas of spiritual figures who plunged into the desert and removed themselves from the human condition, because it's either too messy or worse, an illusion. Not only the Judeo-Christian traditions, but Buddhism and Hinduism see this world as not only relative, but actually a veil of illusion. Maya is the word in Sanskrit. And Plato saw it that way with the allegory of the cave. That the whole purpose of life is to wake up from the illusion of this world and to see beyond the veil to the true real world. But I think that the mystics, especially the women mystics, saw God within the world, not despite. What do you think Jim?

Jim Finley: Yes. Several things. First is that there's interesting parallel with Thomas Merton who was a cloistered monk, but through his writings and prolific letter writing, he was a very engaged and very present cloistered person. And also the early desert, the people, these hermits that went out for this interior martyred him to live in the desert. And the people in the villages would go out and visit the hermit. But the hermit would dialog and they would say, "Give me a word. Let us speak that word in the hearing of which my heart will be awakened."

And another thing that I can't help but imagining. Imagine living there in Norwich and imagine how you'd look forward to your once a week spiritual direction session with Julian. "Oh boy, I'm going to see her tomorrow." And you could sense too, how she discerned where the person was on this path and how they led that ... And through her writing she's still leading us now. We're at the window now sitting with her. Like her deathless presence is talking to us. And there's a certain beauty in that, I think seeing it that way.

Mirabai Starr: It's got to be true or I'm wasting my time with all these mystics over the years. Got to have something relevant for us. That they are somehow in a live presence that we have access to. Allies, ancestors, something that is very real. It's not pretend.

Jim Finley: Exactly. And there's also the tradition that the teacher in passing through the veil of death continues to teach us in death. The communion of saints that somehow this interconnectedness of the living and the dead in God is very much a part of being guided by Julian at a very intimate level. It's so mysterious, all of this.

Kirsten Oats: So just back to the anchorage. So it's the 14th century and Julian is living in this anchorage. You are saying Mirabai with a window to the street, a window to the church. She slept there? She ate there?

Mirabai Starr: She never left.

Jim Finley: Never.

Mirabai Starr: And it wasn't uncommon by the way. This was a cultural norm at the time. Especially for women who didn't want to live in a convent, but wanted to dedicate their lives to prayer and contemplation.

Kirsten Oats: Wow. And Mirabai, in translating her work, did you notice growth or deepening of the work from when she first wrote it down to the long version?

Mirabai Starr: Yeah. It was like that quote I just read you about, at the end, she asked Christ his meaning and revealing all of this. "As long as we're at it, holy one, why are you doing this?" And she asks that repeatedly. And with each inquiry she receives a different and a deeper answer. At the end it was that quote I read. "It's just all about love, Julian. That's all it is." But there are other times when she asks, "What is going on here?" Or she says, "I realized that I was not being given these visions, these showings for myself or at least not for myself alone, but for all beings. This was for the sake of everyone."

And so I think her sense of that bodhisattva feeling of being an instrument for all people grew stronger over time. Like, "Oh yes. I was chosen to be the receptacle for this wellspring of love and wisdom, but it's not just for me to feel good about myself." Because Christ kept saying, "You are infinitely unconditionally loved by an unconditionally loving infinite mother God. And so is everybody else. So is everybody." And she realized that she needed to give that message to the world.

Jim Finley: On that also is I think what she was so aware of in the short text is through the years, it wasn't just what God had revealed to her. But sitting in the solitary silence, this was God's continuing to reveal to her. That it was always in the present tense that what was given is being given and ever shall be given forever. And you see that's the eternity of the passage of time. And then she's advised us to see it's true of us too.

Kirsten Oats: I wanted to ask you both about that. This idea of the graced moments we might experience and if we choose to sit with them, what can come out of it. And I think for a lot of us, we don't choose to sit with them and they fade into the background, maybe even forgotten. And the challenges of the day and the fears of the day or the events of the day can really overtake what we were given in those events. I know both of you as writers have spent time reflecting on your own lives in your work so I just wonder what that's been like for you to have that continue unfolding like Jim was describing.

Mirabai Starr: You mean that we write autobiographically, Jim and I?

Kirsten Oats: Yes. That you sit with things that have happened in your life to mine them. The graced events. You sit with them to mine them for the presence.

Mirabai Starr: One thing that comes to me right away when you ask that question, is that a lot of the jewels that I mine in my writing from my own life are really quite ordinary. They're grace. There are definitely moments of grace. But they happen in the midst of everyday ordinary human life. Changing a diaper on a newborn grandchild will do it for me. That's the crack that God flows into. And so I think that in my writing more and more, those are the moments that are rising up that I unpack and share with people. I love reading that in other writers. How do the ordinary moments of your life continue to reveal the treasures of what Julian would call oneing? Oneing with God.

- Jim Finley: Yeah. I think for me also, I feel ... An interesting spiritual exercise is to write your memoir at the feeling level in the present tense. And so you would go back to your own experience and you would write the story and what were the moments where the light shined out through a broken place and how did that grow? And so for me, I noticed too, it happened when I was very young for me. When I was three years old. When you look at monastic life in a way, living in silent, it's like unrelenting ordinariness. Nothing happens. Nothing ever happens. There's no TV, there's no radio. You never go anywhere. You just eat a piece of cheese and walk in the woods and say the songs and go to bed. An unrelenting ordinariness, divinity shines out. You know what I mean? And I think we're all trying to discover that. There's an extraordinary generosity of God that shines through the ordinariness of everything. And we're trying to be more individually sensitized to that and live by it I think.
- Kirsten Oats: What are some forms to help people with that? Obviously you two are both very gifted writers and disciplined in your writing. For those of us who aren't writing books, what are some ways that we could undertake to look back at our lives in those ways?
- Mirabai Starr: One of the things I do is I keep a list of prompts either in a notebook or on my phone. My phone notes. The prompts are ... They consist of memories. It can be something really simple, like a dream I remember having, a recurring dream as a child. Or it can be a more profound loss. And I just jot down all of these writing prompts. And then I use them as a spiritual practice. It's writing practice. Not practicing to be a published writer, but practicing to know myself and know God. And so I'll time myself. This is through Natalie Goldberg's method. For those of you who are familiar with Natalie Goldberg and writing practice. And then I just set a timer and I write for 15 minutes. 10 minutes, 15 or 20 minutes. It depends on my availability or how full and pregnant the prompt feels to me. And then I write without stopping. I don't let my hands stop moving. Whether I'm writing by hand or on an electronic device I write until the timer goes off. And usually that practice helps me sift down through the layers of surface thoughts and down to a core. What in zen is called first thoughts or original mind. Something that is more authentic and often surprising. It defies my preconceived notions of what I'm writing about.
- Jim Finley: For me, just out of the habit I guess I tend to write six hours a day. I get up in the morning seven days a week and I light a candle and I write out longhand first. It's either working on a text like Julian. And what I'm looking for is how could I find words they would make the truth or beauty what he mystics saying more accessible to us? I would just stay open. What would be a way that it would ... The accessibility of this in my own life. And I also find that when I do that, there's a lot of moments where I don't know how to go on and I get up and I walk around and I sit down. So sometimes I've spent a couple months on two pages and I can't get past the two pages. And then all of a sudden 20 pages will come out. So it feels like a practice or a way of being ... It's hard to explain really. It's kind of a flowing of something. And then it gets habituated. So through the day, it's like that all the time. I can't explain. But it's a meditative state of sharing or channeling something like a faithful scribe, like writing it out and refining it, refining it, refining it, and then letting it go. And so it's been a big part of my life really, for me.
- Kirsten Oats: Wow. Thank you both for sharing that little insight into your lives. Before we close, Mirabai, you mentioned this idea of oneing that Julie shares. Could you speak a little more about that?

Mirabai Starr: Oh, it's my favorite word. I've taken to using it actually. Oneing. So instead of talking about merging with God or union with God, she coined the term oneing. And oneing is a reflection of what already is for Julian. We already are one with God. We always have been and we ever shall be. And this life is nothing if not a reawakening to that reality of our oneness, oneing with God. I love oneing because it's this active verb. And yeah. So in some ways, life is a matter of remembering what has always been. And that oneing of course is rooted in love. It's not just oneing for the sake of oneing. It's oneing for love.

Jim Finley: A word that now to me echoes with oneing is presence. And so I put it poetically. Just one thing that's happening. The infinite presence of God is presencing itself. Is presencing herself. A gerund. An act of self donating presencing. And so it's presencing herself and giving herself away whole and complete in and as the gift and miracle of our very presence that are nothingness without God. And so the oneness is all pervasively the reality that is. There is nothing but the oneness. And really then samsara or original sin or brokenness is falling out of or being exiled from the infinite oneness that alone is real.

And this is why our awakening moments are unitive moments. They're moments of being restored back and rediscovering what's always there. And then how to be habitually grounded in that oneness as it's lived out with the infinite unfolding, intricate complexities of life. The branches of a tree or the clouds in the sky. An endless complexity of unfolding oneness and God's the infinity of that. And that's my sense of it. And so oneing is ... She was saying is turning back around to the oneness that's always there. We don't want to become one. We become one in realizing the oneness that we never weren't. It's oneness in all directions.

Kirsten Oats: Wonderful.

Mirabai Starr: Yes.

Kirsten Oats: Well, any closing words, anything you wanted to mention before we close our session on Julian?

Mirabai Starr: I love that I had the opportunity to talk about her in such detail. I really feel like I shared all my favorite bits. Thank you for the opportunity. With my favorite conversation partner.

Jim Finley: And I feel grateful to have such a beautiful friend teaching partner to talk with about Julian, with you, Kirsten, with us as a grace moment. I think it'll be a grace moment for the people listening too. And also, I'm so touched by the integrity of her presence. The radicality of her presence. This echoing in what we've been sharing here with each other. What a gift really for me too to participate in that and share it.

Kirsten Oats: Me too.

Mirabai Starr: Me too.

Jim Finley: It's tangible. So yeah. Beautiful.

Kirsten Oats: Yes. My heart feels very warm and alive and definitely a sense of her radical, beautiful, sincere presence and the gift that she was given to give to us. I feel so grateful for that gift and the way she committed her life to passing it on. So thank you so much for helping us launch this

season Mirabai. And Jim, thank you for the teaching that is to come. We're looking forward to it.

Jim Finley: Yes.

Mirabai Starr: I am looking forward to tuning in and wonderful questions as always Kirsten.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Thank you.

Kirsten Oats: Thank you. And before we leave, I just want to say thank you to our producer, Corey, who's always in the background supporting us and supporting everyone who listens to this podcast. So thank you, Corey.

Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics. A podcast created by the Center For Action and Contemplation. We're planning to do episodes that answer your questions. So if you have a question, please email us at podcasts@cac.org, or send us a voicemail at cac.org/voicemails. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.