

Turning
to the
Mystics



Mechtild of Magdeburg

Mechtild of Magdeburg: Dialogue 1
with James Finley and Kirsan Oates

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 season 8 of Turning to the Mystics, where we're turning to the 13th-century German mystic, Mechthild of Magdeburg. And I'm here with Jim. Welcome, Jim.

Jim Finley: Yes, yes, welcome. Glad to be with each other again.

Kirsten Oates: And we're here to talk about your first session on Mechthild's book, the Flowing Light of the Godhead.

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: So I wanted to start where you ended your first talk, which is saying that you can't read Mechthild for content or explanation. "It's so dense with a love language that has no conceptual content. But if we sit with each thing she says in a receptive openness of love, we can begin to get reverberations of this loving union that is stirring within us." And you said that this love language is the dowry of our being. Can you just talk a little bit more about that?

Jim Finley: Yes. The dowry of our being, one way to say it is that we say that God is love, that the infinite love of God in an ongoing, self-donating act is creating us in the image and likeness of love as our very identity, our very destiny. And so the infinite love of God is our origin. The infinite love of God is our sustaining ground. It is our ultimate identity, and it is our fulfillment. This is love. And so it's in some sense, a God-given, almost like the very ontology of ourself. The very living substance of ourself is love. And so in that sense, it's the dowry of our being.

Kirsten Oates: And how do you create that kind of open receptivity to love that you described?

Jim Finley: First of all, I think each one of us creates it or responds to it at the psychological level, and responding as children to our parents' love for us. And our parents' love for us, then we respond with love, and when we respond with love, we see that it delights them. And so we also learned that in the family growing up that it's love that makes the house a home. It's love that makes the house safe, that a life rich with love is rich with meaning, rich with fulfillment. It's tricky because sometimes we're not so fortunate to be in a house where love is the underlying pervasive reality, and it's intermingled with betrayals of love. So we're all trying to deal with and sort that out. But with God, there's this infinite love, infinitely giving itself to us. And we then experience that in our faith. Experience in our faith is like a template of understanding of the scriptures of Jesus and everything.

And again, it's an act of conversion because sometimes if we carry the betrayals of love inside of us, it's hard to take in the love of God. It's hard to do. It's like a part of us doesn't believe it or part of us is... So there's this intermingling then of psychological healing of love wounds and the way in which as those are healed, the love of God aids us in that healing. We can grow and emerge into a more stabilized love as discipleship, of discipleship of the Lord.

What we have with Mechthild is that she reaches such a purity of love, it becomes mystical. It's mystical that it's the intermingling of God's love with our very being as the beloved of God. So as we read her, insofar as we're moved by what she says, it bears witness of the capacities for these mystical energies of love to grow in us, as we turn to her for guidance in helping us to stabilize it, and then to live by it and share it with others.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, do you think it helps to slow down to find the opening to what she's saying or what she's revealing?

Jim Finley: I would say, my sense of it in the broad sense is that every time we're graced with a moment of love, say a child from their parent or the friend or the beloved, whatever, when we experience that, we're in the presence of love. It slows us down that as we become present to this love, that we experience flowing from the presence of the friend, the spouse, the lover and so on, and we internalize it. Then at a secondary level, we see this as the daily rendezvous with God or the quiet time. We get carried along by the momentum of the day's demands. We see it's important to choose to slow down, to be present to this love that's always there, the rendezvous with God, which is the practice of meditation and prayer. So we are slowed down. We're paused with this love thing that's always there.

We internalize it, and then we see that we have a precarious oneness with the love, even though it's always there, breath by breath, heartbeat by heartbeat. And therefore, we cultivate this desire through daily prayer and meditation to habituate that. And so little by little, what we habituate in the quiet time with God or the quiet time reading Mechthild or listening to Mechthild, a session, then little by little that soaks into us and starts showing up throughout the day. This atmospheric love starts influencing every moment of our life over the course of our life, like maturing in love.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful. Well, I wanted to turn to the book, the Flowing Light of the Godhead. And there's a little section above the section that you read, and I wondered if we could read it together. It's another little dialogue between Mechthild and God, and I think you're more qualified to be God.

Jim Finley: Well, for the sake of, I could put it up like a play.

Kirsten Oates: Like a play.

Jim Finley: Act on a play. It's like a play. It's like a play. Really, could see her book that way. So in that case, you would start because you're going to start talking to me, God. So then I'll respond.

Kirsten Oates: Okay, great.

Jim Finley: Okay, good.

Kirsten Oates: "So, our Lord God, who made this book?"

Jim Finley: "I made it in my powerlessness, for I cannot refrain myself as to my gifts."

Kirsten Oates: "Well, then, Lord, what shall the title of the book be, which is to Your glory alone?"

Jim Finley: “It shall be called A Flowing Light of my Godhead into all hearts that live free of hypocrisy.”

Kirsten Oates: I wonder if you could comment on that.

Jim Finley: I mean, this is my sense of it. First of all, a lot of this book was written in deep prayer, ecstatic prayer. So it was this very love exchange in prayer, like the later mansions of Teresa, John. All these mystics, it's this way. And there's also something else that when words flow out of the awakened heart, the person who's in the flow of God's voice, they sense that God's speaking through them. And in a sense, as they write it out like a faithful scribe, it's this whole sense of inspiration. So she's saying in effect, “Who made this book?” She knows she didn't make it that it was too much for her. She could have never come up with this.

And so God reassures her, and she's letting us in on what God's telling her, which she knows is God says that God made it. Not in the sense of scripture or scripture, God's word, but in the sense where God truly does speak to transformed hearts and speaks. And I think, to put it in a broader way too, sometimes if there's a friend who's suffering a lot and you say something out of your love for them that helps them and you don't know how to say that, you would say God gave it to you to say that. So I think it's in that broad sense. See? It's God, the one who wrote this out, and she's just writing it out and sharing it with us, so we can listen in on their loving exchange and join in this way.

Kirsten Oates: How amazing to live and write day by day in that sense of, “Where's that coming from?”

Jim Finley: And also when he says in my powerlessness, it's going to be a theme in the whole book. God freely chooses to be powerless, not to completely give God away to us as our very reality as the beloved and our nothingness without God. Meister Eckhart said, when we were looking at Eckhart, he said, “God must do it.” So God freely chooses in this powerlessness, and so he cannot refrain his gifts, and the gift is God. I cannot refrain from giving the gift of myself, see, to the beloved, which is her, which is us.

Kirsten Oates: I wondered about this last little bit. “It should be called a flowing light of my Godhead into all the hearts that live free of hypocrisy.”

Jim Finley: There's something else later we're going to be looking at, the Meister Eckhart and the beginnings are together like this. And we'll see later too that... Or it was the Dominican priest who was her confessor and so on. And of course, for Meister Eckhart, you'll remember the Godhead as the infinity of God, beyond the Trinity, beyond the God. So the Flowing Light of the Godhead, you see that influence of the abyss of God beyond all distinctions. Beyond all distinctions, but it's a flowing light of the Godhead that's very nice. It's like the flow. And it's very close to the dao and the Tao Te Ching, like this flowing dao, this flowing divinity that courses through all of reality, this divinity of this.

Kirsten Oates: And Jim, could you comment on this idea that it flows into the hearts of those that

live free of hypocrisy?

Jim Finley: We were looking at the cloud of unknowing sometime back. And it's interesting when the author of the cloud of Unknowing starts out the book, he talks about this awakening of this deep love, this influx of God. And this whole book he said is going to be written off for guidance and how to surrender to that. And then he says, "As for busybodies and the hypocritical, I would just assume they never laid eyes on this book. I had no intention of writing for them." And he kind of implies there are authors who write for hypocrites and busybodies, but this is not for people in a hurry. This is not for people. So it isn't that we aren't in our own way hypocritical. Sometimes we are. But in our heart, Merton says, "With God a little sincerity goes a long, long way."

"So I'm really writing for those who step forward beyond hypocrisy to risk, acknowledging the vulnerability of the sincerity as seeking to be close to God. And that sincerity, they realize is given by God to them to sincerely want to be close to God." And that includes us in so far as we're moved by this or touched by this and all these mystics, and bears witness that this pertains to us.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm. Wonderful. It's such a gift how we've just done Eckhart and then to feel the connection between Eckhart and Mechthild. She was a student of his. She was close to him. And that flowing light of the Godhead, just beautiful to feel that connection, having traveled through Eckhart and now beginning on our journey with Mechthild.

Jim Finley: And we'll be looking at this closer later on as we go through this series with her, but what's striking is how different they are in that she's an ecstatic mystic, but there's no ecstatic in Eckhart. So we're going to see the ways in which they're different this way. See, for Eckhart, it's the path of knowing that transcends all conceptual knowing, which is infused with love. And for her it's the love beyond all feelings of love, beyond all consolation of love which grants a deep knowing. So the primacy of love and the primacy of knowing, at one level the language is very different, but when one is there, the other's always present also. And it's a matter of how God calls us, how we're led, and it can go back and forth throughout our life. Sometimes we are more in this ecstatic kind of devotional love energy, and sometimes we're in this deep God knowledge beyond concepts of God, and they're always intermingled with each other. But it is interesting to see how they meet in the middle using very different modalities of divine union.

Kirsten Oates: Wouldn't you have loved to have seen a conversation between Eckhart and Mechthild?

Jim Finley: I'd like to have lunch with Mechthild. It'd be great. All these people, it'd be nice to be with them. Yeah, [laughs].

Kirsten Oates: So I thought it would be fun and maybe helpful for us to read through the whole dialogue in that same way that we just read that little bit about the title of the book. Before we start that, I did want to just ask you about the names that are being used, Lady Love and then Mistress and Queen.

Jim Finley: Yes. Let's clarify that. See, when she says to Lady Love, "God greets you, Lady Love," and therefore she's making a distinction between God and Lady Love. So how are we to understand Lady Love? And the way I understand it, I think her sense too, is that there's the sovereignty of God, God as Trinity, God as infinite, God as creator, God as unknowable, God as ineffable, all that. And God's also ineffable love. God is love. So Lady Love is the love of God that greets us and meets us at our level and accesses us, Julianne of Norwich with familiarity. So it's almost God meets us in the sincerity of our desire and merges with this here in a loving exchange back and forth and so on. And so that's Lady Love.

And also, although gender doesn't apply to God because these categories of even being a self doesn't apply to God. But also though, since God is neither male nor female, but God's the creator of the masculine, the creator of the feminine, therefore God's the infinity of the masculine. God's the infinity of the feminine. But the church, by all the culture, scripture itself, is so patriarchal in its influence. We're so used to He, He, He, even though we know the teaching is that God's neither male nor female, yet infinitely both. So it's delightful to hear this feminine language of this tenderness of God's love coming to us as Lady Love. See? So he's speaking to her then as Mistress and Queen, like my mistress, my helpmate, my paramour, my lover, my beloved, and queen of heaven I make you.

There's an old song, years, years ago. The guy sings to the woman, "If I were king dilly, dilly, you would be my queen." And she says to him, "Who told you so, dilly, dilly? Who told you so?" And he answers back, "I told me so, dilly, dilly. I told me so." It's just the way it is. "So in my eyes, you're queen," God says. You're cocky. So we're endowed with this divine royalty in God's eyes. So we meet in the familiarity of our ordinariness, but an ordinariness that's infused by God giving us this divine stature in grace in our ordinariness. That's the subtlety of it, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Beautiful. Okay, well, Jim, let's read it together. So this is how Love and the Queen spoke to each other.

Jim Finley: Yes. And again, as a clarification, in the book each book is divided into sections, and the sections are numbered, so this is just one section. So we're just choosing one section and then slowing it way down to see how rich every phrase is, but the whole book is like this. So this is getting into the richness of Mechthild's love language like this. So we'll go back and forth between God and the soul. Good.

Kirsten Oates: Lovely. "The soul came to love, greeted her with great deference and said, 'God greet you, Lady Love.'"

Jim Finley: "May God reward you Mistress and Queen."

Kirsten Oates: "Lady Love, you are indeed perfect."

Jim Finley: "Mistress and Queen, that is why I am above all things."

Kirsten Oates: "Lady Love, you struggled many a year before you forced the exalted Trinity to pour itself utterly into the humble virginal womb of Mary."

Jim Finley: "Mistress and Queen, that was to your honor and benefit."

Kirsten Oates: “Lady Love, you have now come here to me and have taken from me everything I ever gained on earth.”

Jim Finley: “Mistress and Queen, you have made a happy exchange.”

Kirsten Oates: “Lady Love, you have taken from me my childhood.”

Jim Finley: “Mistress and Queen, in its place I have given you heavenly freedom.”

Kirsten Oates: “Lady Love, you have taken from me all my youth.”

Jim Finley: “Mistress and Queen, in its place I’ve given you many a holy virtue.”

Kirsten Oates: “Lady Love, you have taken from me possessions, friends and relatives.”

Jim Finley: Come now, Mistress and Queen. That’s a petty complaint.”

Kirsten Oates: “Lady Love, you have taken from me the world, worldly honor and all earthly riches.”

Jim Finley: “Mistress and Queen, I shall make that up to you in one hour with the Holy Spirit on earth just as you wish it.”

Kirsten Oates: “Lady Love, you have brought me to such a pass that my body is wrecked by a strange weakness.”

Jim Finley: “Mistress and Queen, in exchange I have given you much sublime knowledge.”

Kirsten Oates: “Lady Love, you have devoured my flesh and my blood.”

Jim Finley: “Mistress and Queen, you have thereby been purified and drawn into God.”

Kirsten Oates: “Lady Love, you are a robber. For this as well shall you make reparation.”

Jim Finley: “Mistress and Queen, then take me.”

Kirsten Oates: “Lady Love, now you have recompensed me a hundredfold on earth.”

Jim Finley: “Mistress and Queen, in addition, you may demand God and all his kingdom.”

Kirsten Oates: End scene.

Jim Finley: End scene. Exactly, end scene.

Kirsten Oates: Well, thanks for doing that, Jim. That was fun for me. So the couplets are amazing, and they seem very deliberate in what’s coupled together. Do you feel that when you read it?

Jim Finley: I really do. The commentary on her at the beginning of the preface of the book from a literary point of view, she’s very gifted. She’s a very gifted writer, and it gives that kind of a poetic precision to what she says. You don’t feel she’s fumbling for the words like this. And so she has that graced gift to put these words, which are words that she interiorly heard in her heart from God and she’s translating it to share with us.

Kirsten Oates: And she wasn't theologically educated. So can you help us connect her experience to the scripture and being brought up Catholic to what she's sharing?

Jim Finley: Yes. Well, they surmised that of her language that she was from the upper classes in the sense that there's an educational foundation to what she says because she was a woman in the beginning, not in the sense of say Eckhart as a... It wasn't like that. But she did have exposure to kind of a cultured sense and a reflective sense of scripture and the tradition and so on. She kind of shows that with the quality of her mind and how she expresses herself.

Kirsten Oates: So starting with the second couplet, "Lady Love, you are indeed perfect. Mistress and Queen, that is why I'm above all things." And when you defined things, you said any aspect of our experience of ourselves in finite consciousness. You talked about our health, our intimacy needs, how we feel about ourselves. And I was struck by that because often when I think of things, I think of things external to myself. And so I wondered it that...

Jim Finley: Yeah, let's say it is certainly that also. So things that are really at this table as a thing, and my pots and pans in the kitchen are things, and that's true. Those things are things. But in the broadest sense, a thing is anything created, God's uncreated and pouring itself out as a reality of all things. And it's nothing that's without God. So things, therefore, refers... So what's created then is also these intimate variables of our existence. See, it's like I say, our intimacy needs or lack thereof, see, because these things are also in conditioned states. They vary in conditions. They can rise and fall more or less. And so the sum total of these fluctuating patterns of these created aspects of our things in our passage through time that God's love is above all those things. He's also the source of all those things and also the reality of all those things. And they're nothing that's without God.

But the point is, what God is saying to her, what Love is saying to her, but because this infinite love giving to you is infinite, if you're going to settle for these created things that are finite and therefore infinitely less than me, infinitely less than us, is if you can gather around you these things or these aspects of yourself and try to keep them or hold them, you're in this cul-de-sac of what's infinitely less than what alone will fulfill you, which is this love. Because I created you in the image and likeness of my love, and therefore I'm above all things. There's no disrespect for the thing at all, matter of fact, it's to see God's present in them. But it's to see that really that the sum total of all of them together is not enough to put to rest the longings of our heart because this infinite love alone is enough.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, that's helpful. So in a way, God's above all things that we might identify with in our finite existence, internal or that we're identified with what we own or whether we're identified with a particular feeling.

Jim Finley: I would put it this way too because we all do this. I mean, we're all trying to grow out of it. Is that things refer to anything we're capable of attaining or losing is the thing. See, because we can't attain God's love because we already have it. We already are. It's a manifestation, and we can't lose it because God will never take it away. See? But anything we're capable... And then there's this self, the haver that has and holds and loses. And so when we're functioning at that level, we can tell we're always trying to manage things and cope and get like this. In a certain way, that's important in life. We all have to attend the store. But when it becomes a be all and end all and eclipses this love that's infinitely greater and shines out through these

things, so that's this kind of delicate love sensitivity I think that the mystics are called and Jesus is calling us to in the scriptures.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, that's really helpful. You said something I wanted to repeat because it felt so helpful when I listened to this session. You said the infinite love of God gives itself fully to us, and we live in incremental realizations of this love. The limitations are our limitations.

Jim Finley: Yes. I think it's understanding all these mystics. See, because when you hear the way she talks and all the mystic you might go, "Wow, I don't think I've ever experienced it like that. And to tell you the truth, I don't know if I ever will. I mean, this is so lofty. Who is this person?" And there's some truth to that. There could be truth to that. It's given to whom it's given. But really you move in closer. See? It's like I say, the Tao Te Ching, it says, "The dao, the flowing divinity coursing through all things, is that the dao," Laozi says, "is like water. It seeks the lowest places to give life to all that lives." So this infinite love of God is infinitely giving the infinity of itself away in non-incremental infinity to the very lowest things of all. So even the slightest little first stirrings of God's presence in our life is the first stirrings of this infinite love given to us as the first stirring.

So the limitations are not on God's side at all because it's infinite in all directions. The limitations are in us, but that's where God meets us. God always meets us where we are. That's why I use the example that small children are so limited, but we don't make fun of them or tease them or dismiss them. They're all the more lovable because of how precious they are in their limits. And so we start where we are, and we're all the more precious in the limits, in the eyes of this love that's giving itself to us unexplainably, this infinite love and meeting us in and at the familiarity, and meeting us where we are and touching us like that.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. Couplet 3 reads, "Lady Love, you struggled many a year before you forced the exalted Trinity to pour itself utterly into the humble virginal womb of Mary. Mistress and Queen, that was to your honor and benefit." And I was thinking a couple of things about this one. One was I can imagine you're reading the scriptures and thinking, "Oh my gosh, it takes so long to get to Jesus. We have to go through all this when..." So I was laughing at that a little bit.

Jim Finley: Yes. By the way, I said this too at a talk and so just bring it up again as we talk like this now, is that what I'm doing here in my reflections, this love language is so evocative. So I'm sharing what comes to me and having sat with it and listened to it and so on. So as the listeners listen to her and listen to what it means to me, it invites them to stop and get echoes of what it means to them because that's where it's touching them like this. So at one level, to me, what this is many a year is sacred history, running through the scriptures, through the Torah and the prophets and the exodus and all of it. It's an unfolding coming to the fullness of time. So it's that. But also many a year is how long it takes us to finally believe that this love pertains to us seriously. Seriously. And little by little, we get little droplets of it, we get little traces of it. See?

So that's why I say how's it come to pass that you have come to be the person who's even capable of being touched or moved by such things? How has it come to pass? And you look back at your life. It's been a long circuitous journey with a lot of cul-de-sacs in it. But each one, infinite love is meeting you there in the cul-de-sac. Love is meeting you in the

stumbling places. But over time, it ripens to the point where when you hear it strikes a chord in your heart. So I say with grace in an open-ended freewheeling way, everything's right on schedule. It's like this. But likewise, we don't know a year or 10 years from now how much even richer it will be because we're in the arc of an unfolding process. And I think there's a foreshadowing of death, of passing through the gate of death into God, which is infinitely beyond all of this. So this is dress rehearsals for this infinite love being poured out and taking us to itself unexplainably forever. But it's starting now in the intimate sincerity of our hearts.

Kirsten Oates: It's interesting that she says, "Lady Love you struggled many a year." So the struggle was on God's side.

Jim Finley: Yeah, it's interesting that. See? That kind of graced anthropomorphic thing as if God's going, "Oh my God, how can I put up with these people? Come on, come on. I have to do this." Which is the whole of Torah. It's a call of Abraham. It's a whole thing. And for us it's Jesus. Jesus comes so that in Jesus, God's response to us and our brokenness is to become identified with us as precious in our brokenness. And so we're met and loved and seen in our brokenness and the love that sees through the brokenness into the godly preciousness of ourself in the brokenness. And that's why this grace then is this experiential salvation that instead of the idolatry of our internalized faults and failings as having the authority to name who we are, we see that only this love that loves us so in our failings as the authority to name who we are. And that's really discipleship. These are the mystical reverberations of this discipleship, this love, that when love touches suffering, the suffering turns of love into mercy.

Kirsten Oates: Do you think the way these couplets are written, this one's coming third before she's really getting into anything about herself, that she names this part of Jesus coming into the world? It was obviously a very important part of her belief system and of her understanding of love and God.

Jim Finley: That's a good point. This is my sense of this, how this is unfolding in her heart, how this is unfolding in your heart, unfolding in mine. But here's the thing, we realize that this is what is unfolding in the hearts of men and women all over the world who've ever lived. We're in this together. And so when we read the stories of scripture and we read the stories and the unfolding of things, it's an unfolding of the interconnectedness of this love. That's why when we read the stories of scripture or the Psalms, they're really lessons the person is sharing they learned from God. But when we read it and take it to heart, we're learning what the person learned from God.

It's interpersonal and very societal in that way, but it's all of society distilled into us as a portal that opens out upon all of society. "Geez, this is our heart, each one of us." Each one of us is worth the sum total of the whole world and everything in it and every person. Every person is worth all that God is worth in our eternal nothingness without God. And so each one of us is our own unique relation to this love shared by everyone. We're all woven together in our graced humanity.

Kirsten Oates: It's interesting too that she mentions the Trinity because Trinity's not explicitly mentioned in scripture, but I guess in the Catholic tradition she would've been brought into that idea.

- Jim Finley: Very much so. By this time it was just so established because the Trinity, both in the Roman church and in the Eastern church, worked on in the early centuries of the church, St. Augustine and others working on the... By that time, it was part of the landscape of the Christian language of God, the Christian understanding of God. And she was very much steeped in that.
- Kirsten Oates: Couplet 4, “Lady Love, you have now come here to me and have taken from me everything I have ever gained on earth. Mistress and Queen, you have made a happy exchange.” And you talked about that we’re made for more than anything we can attain here on earth.
- Jim Finley: Yes. And I was just thinking about it. I thought too I’d like to add this insight in this is first of all the sense again how has this love taken everything? Is that what you’ve done, Love, in giving me the taste of yourself and your oneness with me, you’ve taken from me the ability to even begin to pretend that sum total of all of the things will ever be enough for me. And that’s how you’ve taken them from me. And then when he says, “You’ve made a happy exchange,” what I find intriguing about that is he doesn’t say, “Keep working on it. You’ll get there,” that you’ve made it as if it’s already settled. You see, you’ve made a happy exchange.
- So there’s part of her that’s in the process of leaning into it, but there’s also a part of her in which the deep yes has already been given. See, it’s already settled. And again, that’s for the deep yes in us touches the ground of our very being, the dowry of our being. See, this is already settled. This exchange is already... There’s a potentiality to be actualized. We are created by God as a capacity for God in a nothingness without God. And therefore, the exchange has already been made by God. It’s the very reality of who we are. But then we’re to actualize that exchange that’s been made by recognizing, surrendering to it, choosing it, yielding to it, which is the spiritual life.
- Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm. And that can bring about it. The happy exchange in our experience could be this inner peace we can sometimes touch in on that stands outside of circumstance.
- Jim Finley: Exactly. I remember way back when we were looking at St. John of the Cross. He talks about substantial union and effective union. He said substantial union is God’s oneness with everything that is the very reality. So if God would withdraw it, everything would disappear. That’s substantial. He said effective union is love is the extent to which we realize God’s oneness with us and love and say yes to it, which isn’t always there at all, so a mysticism. One way of looking at mysticism, an effective union, it’s in our experience where we realize the substantial union. We realize unexplainably God’s generosity being poured out as the reality of ourself, as a effect to us in the heart. You know what I mean? It’s like this. So anyway, there’s that.
- Kirsten Oates: Wonderful.
- Jim Finley: Turning to the Mystics will continue in a moment.
- Kirsten Oates: Couplet 5, “Lady Love, you have taken from me my childhood. Mistress and Queen, in its place, I have given you the heavenly freedom.” And so this idea of a heavenly freedom that comes from handing over our childhood.”
- Jim Finley: Again, what I see in it is, and this is a big part of psychotherapy too, we all bring with us the

story of what we've learned in our childhood. We've internalized experiences, and it's given us an internalized sense of identity based on our history, both painful and joyful, but to detriment and gifts and so on. But it's this historical unfolding of ourselves. And what she's saying here is you've taken all that away as being an adequate way to understand who I am and your love. See? And in that sense, you've taken it away. And I think that's the gift of it. But once we with God's grace, see who we are in love, we can look back to see how God's grace was at work in the unfolding of our story. It came to pass. It came to pass. And we can see the providential unfolding of our developmental journey to where we are today with these things.

Kirsten Oates: Couplet 6, "Lady Love, you have taken from me all of my youth. Mistress and Queen, in its place, I have given you many a holy virtue." And I wondered if you could talk about can we access these virtues? How might we find these virtues in ourselves?

Jim Finley: Yes, it would be good to clarify that, virtue. Latin for virtues is strength, so the strength to become. For example, in Catholic thought, the theological virtues, faith, hope, and charity are empowered. It's a virtue to become with the grace of God and to a oneness with God infinitely beyond what we can achieve of ourself, the theological virtues, and divinizing transformative virtues. So she's assuming it's that, but she's also saying or God told her right at the very beginning, "For I am powerless to give myself to you." So God's paradoxical strength is freely choosing to be powerless, see, to completely give all that God is to us as God's beloved. That's the paradoxical virtuous of God. And then likewise for us, the reciprocity of that is our strength is being rendered powerless and choosing to be powerless, to surrender ourselves completely to this love, this powerless to give itself to us. And the union takes place there.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, wow. So the ultimate holy virtue is this mutual surrender.

Jim Finley: It's a mutual... That's right. Which empowers us to live out of that surrender. But everything that we do, we body it forth and bear witness to it like she did in the writing of this book. And it has something out of us to live in fidelity to it and share it.

Kirsten Oates: There's a lot of resonance with what we learned in Eckhart about this sense of detachment because the holy virtue comes in after you've taken my childhood, you've taken my youth, all the ways we've grown up into a personality, into an identity. And the holy virtue arises by handing that over.

Jim Finley: Yes, exactly. This would be one way where they touch each other. Also, the gospels at the heart of this is that one way of saying it. We said before in previous sessions is that in these spiritual matters, the deep issue really isn't who my father thought I was or my mother thought I was or my brothers or sisters thought I was, who my boyfriends and lovers or husband or wife, my pastor, my boss. That's really not the issue. Likewise, the issue isn't who I think I am. How can I join God who God eternally knows me to be hidden with Christ and God forever before the origins of the universe? And what we catch ourself doing is taking an internalized belief about ourself and believing it has authority to name who we are.

Either in terms where you say I'm proud of myself or I'm ashamed of myself or I'm worried about myself. It isn't that we don't need to deal at that level because we do, but it's where

they take on a kind of opaque or kind of final place and we can't see this light that transcends all that shines through all of that. And it's taking us to itself beyond all of that, which is this love, which requires the surrender to that. See, as long as I can still be trying to navigate my way through, I'm kind of in control in a way, making the best of the situation. But in being finitely loved by infinite love, there's no control. And so we're surrendering ourselves over to this love, unexplainably takes us to itself on its terms and no longer even lets us live on our terms. And its terms are infinite generosity of love, and that's praise the Lord.

Kirsten Oates: And that's our holy virtue. Really, there's nothing we can enact. It's kind of just this mutual love relationship that we can be kind of taken into and surrender to.

Jim Finley: And it's true that we're always responding to a love that's already infinitely there, but we're not measured by the degree which we're able to respond to it. See? We're measured by the love that loves us so and our inabilities to respond to it. See? And there's another tripping point, not to be disheartened. "I can't get past this." And it isn't about getting past anything. You see, you've already been overtaken and being drawn into this love that's infinitely giving itself to you in the midst of the very things you can't get beyond. And that's the gift of tears. I mean, I think that's the peace that surpasses understanding.

Kirsten Oates: Couplet 7, "Lady Love, you have taken from me possessions, friends and relatives. Come now, Mistress and Queen. That is a petty complaint." I love that language, come now.

Jim Finley: Get over it. Get over it. Lighten up. It's like, "I get it. Of course, of course, of course." It's petty because when you look at the sum total of all that I've taken as being enough to consummate your heart's desire, compared to me this infinite love that alone can consummate your heart's desire, "Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah," and you're complaining. See, but this is where you're growing into this that you're complaining because you're just a human being, and it was the familiarity of God. It's almost like back and forth with each other. "Oh, come on, now." That's a funny complaint, and then she's kind of smiles, I guess, and looks back by, "I guess, you're right."

Kirsten Oates: When it's everything, my possessions, my friends, my relatives and so on.

Jim Finley: Yeah. Because you know why? Because they're all ephemeral because of death, and the self that's constituted of them is itself ephemeral, but everything's passing away except this love that never passes away. This oddity permeating everything that's passing away, and all this is about that kind of-

Kirsten Oates: Back and forward into that.

Jim Finley: Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: Couplet 8, "Lady Love, you have taken from me worldly honor and all earthly riches. Mistress and Queen, I shall make that up to you in one hour with the Holy Spirit on earth just as you wish it." I wondered if this was pointing to what the mystics say about not having to wait until we're dead to experience this oneness with God.

Jim Finley: Yes. Here's how I see it too is that we can be graced with a moment of boundaryless oneness that even as fleeting as it might've been, we sense that we were fleetingly realizing this eternal

oneness with us, it never ends. And therefore having tasted it just one taste and if I never tasted it again, the one taste was so overwhelmingly divine in all directions. I live by the light that shines off from that taste, see, and I can live by that. But I think what often happens and that we are given a taste like that, and it isn't that we might not just be given one taste. And some people don't get that taste. They get mediations of taste through love and grace and through holiness and so on. But you see if it comes once, it doesn't come just once, but it's in God's hands. See? Because the issue is, and this is what Eckhart was careful about too with all of this, when the touch comes, we can get attached to it.

And we don't realize that when the touch was there like God in all directions, we don't realize that in the moments where we sense that God's missing, we don't realize that God's the infinity of the experience that God is missing. We don't see that they're equal. It's so hard for us to see that. And so with Eckhart's knowledge, you need to be very careful because imagine we're trying to obtain a certain kind of knowledge we can have rather than a knowledge that undoes having knowledge into this transconceptual knowing of the Godhead. But likewise, this is a love which we have to be careful to be detached from the moments that we're flooded with this love because it may momentarily flood up into our senses, into our emotions. It's a love that permeates all the moments that we're not aware of it at all. And little by little, we can learn to know that's true. I don't feel it, but I don't need to because I know it never leaves me, and I live by it.

Kirsten Oates: And Mechthild died not feeling it.

Jim Finley: She did. Yeah. In the last talk I'm going to give. It's very powerful because at the end of her life where she was blind, she couldn't feed herself, clothe herself, and all sense of God went away, and she was at peace. And I want to talk about that. It's analogous to the dark night of the soul in John. It's being deeply at peace with it and just because it has a lot of lessons for us.

Kirsten Oates: Mm-hmm. And it goes to what you were just saying about... Because she's obviously radically experiencing this love for long periods of time. And even someone like that, it can fall away. So not being attached to it in the way to...

Jim Finley: I think there's another thing in this too for her, all this always, is that when we're bereft of any sense of God, just lost, moments like that, we realize we're not alone, that our aloneness is one with all the people throughout the world who are bereft, that our suffering doesn't belong to us. Our suffering weaves us into and unites us with the suffering so that even though we can't feel it at all, to know that we can hold that place. Because we've been graced by knowing that even though we can't feel it at all, we know in our heart that it's true. They don't feel it at all, and they don't yet know that it's true. Likewise, the dark night of faith, you can even take away the ability to know that it's true. God can take that away from this total complete dependence on God alone.

Kirsten Oates: Couplet 9, "Lady Love, you have brought me to such a pass that my body is wracked by strange weakness. Mistress and Queen, in exchange I have given you much sublime knowledge." I love this couplet because it's rare these days in the Christian Church that the body is addressed and supported in teaching in these kind of ways. So you talked about this idea of a deep-bodied understanding of the truth of my body.

Jim Finley: In a way, that's true. There tends to be in the Christian tradition the sense of mind or God or awareness like this compared to, example, to Hinduism with yoga. For example, and the āsanās, the postures and the breath. But also, what's interesting about these mystics in the cloud of unknowing in all of them that this kind of deep, surrendered quiet in God's presence is very bodily. That when we sit this way, we're not thinking anything. We're surrendered over. And so in the body then where I say that our hands are at rest.

Kirsten Oates: In meditation.

Jim Finley: Because it's a set in meditation.

Kirsten Oates: In meditation.

Jim Finley: Because this is Sabbath, that this isn't something we can reach or make happen or fabricate or get like this. And so we keep surrendering ourselves over to the Sabbath. But in the Sabbath, we realize that our body embodies the love of God for us as the beloved. It's not theoretical or abstract that our body is the embodiment of this love taking us to itself. The incarnation, the word became flesh and brought among us, and it's our flesh and your flesh.

Kirsten Oates: I love that example that you gave in meditation practice, this idea of putting our body at rest and allowing God to infuse us with this. But also, you've talked about in a state of service, an activity that we can also feel, that sense in our bodies of being driven by something bigger than ourselves, beyond what we thought we were capable of.

Jim Finley: Yes. I think really, one, it can happen to us. It's deep bodily stillness. Sometimes it washes over us, but sometimes too we can choose to be faithful to the quiet time. But in the quiet time, we realize what's so amazing is that it becomes non-distinguished from the intimacy of our body that somehow our body is woven into it and is embodying this very love beyond our body, like a quiet amazement. And then I think that's the awareness of the breath, the awareness of our heart beating, the awareness of the body of the beloved. But then what also happens then when we serve, sometimes I used to put it this way about follow me. Jesus says we can't have our valet carry the cross up the hill for us from a distance, that any ministry takes a piece out of us. The love's labor, it comes out without a price, and we invest ourselves.

This is why interesting, ora et labora, prayer and work. And the interesting thing about labora, about work is at the end of the workday you're tired, and very often you didn't quite get it finished as neatly as you hoped. So in work, you're always engaged with reality that doesn't let you live on your own terms. And knowing that labor is not some rude interruption to your agenda to become a mystic. See? Knowing that in the labor itself, whether the physical service or teaching, I mean, whatever the labor is, cooking a meal, that somehow God's the infinity of that labor. God's the infinity that he had to invest that when we invest ourselves, we meet God investing in us, in the concreteness of the labor at hand. It can have that quality to it.

Kirsten Oates: Amazing. So the strange weakness that Mechthild describes is really the experience of God's strength or God's love kind of through the body...

Jim Finley: It is.

Kirsten Oates: ... enlivening the body.

Jim Finley: Later we might be looking at Simone Weil, who was a great mystic. And she identified a lot with the poor, the working class, like Long. She went and worked in the factories. But I also think sometimes when we put in a full day and maybe a lot of good things happened, at the end of the day, we lay down and thank God. "I'm finished." But we spent ourselves. And that's not to say we don't need to modulate that because we can have burnout, and we need to take care of ourselves, but it's not as if it's some neat thing at a distance. But it's always an investing of ourselves in this, and the transformation occurs in that self investment, which is always has a physiological or bodily dimension to it. Like her writing this book, *labora*. *Labra* is a sweet labor see of concretized love, which she wrote her whole life. She just is kind of amazing. It's really amazing really.

Kirsten Oates: It reminds me of Teresa of Ávila, who said, "I'm writing this under obedience."

Jim Finley: Exactly. That's exactly right. And Julian too, she had these experiences, but in the long version of revelation, divine love. Keep refining it out in solitude as *labora*, loves distilling it out. It's the integrity of the work.

Kirsten Oates: Couplet 10, "Lady Love, you have devoured my flesh and my blood. Mistress and Queen, you have thereby been purified and drawn into God." This is very radical language, but devouring my flesh and my blood. And I wondered if you would comment on that.

Jim Finley: Yes, I would say this, that let's say my flesh in my blood is the concreteness of my survival instinct. It is the concreteness of any pain that I'm carrying in my body. It's the concreteness of the limitations of my energy. It embodies also concerns I might have about my health and all this. And I showed this too, at 80 years old, my diminishment, kind of melting away. Your body starts disappearing. See? But then you sense that really that disappearance isn't a loss, that the disappearance of the body is the body being ravaged by this love that never dies. And so it's like that engagement. It also happens with hospice work or touching suffering. Spiritual direction too can be like this. There's a certain immediacy about it, and we have to be bodily present too and one with the one that we're with, one with us. And to me, it has those connotations to it.

Kirsten Oates: I think you also said that this helps us see that even death is trustworthy. And I felt that in reading that if my flesh and blood will be devoured by God in my final moments, if that's what's happening to me in my death, then it's trustworthy.

Jim Finley: Yes. That when we die, if we live this way by love, which means we've already died interiorly of everything but love. So in biological, physical death happens. This physical death, we just know in our heart we're not annihilated but consummated. See? That if God's Lord of life, God's Lord of death, or God's the infinity of life. God's the infinity of death because death is the gate of heaven. That's why I say the downside about heaven is only the dead need applied. But here you can be in heaven before you die if you die of love. So when the hour of death comes, there's a holiness about it. There's kind of a deep reverential censure in the presence of something. And this is the stages of dying too, like a coming to acceptance, really. It's freedom from the tyranny of death in the midst of death. And so by learning to live this way, it's freedom from the tyranny of suffering in the midst of our suffering because

the suffering is infused with this love that sustains us in our suffering, like the constancy of love permeating our wavering waves.

Kirsten Oates: Couplet 11, “Lady Love, you are a robber, for this as well shall you make reparation. Mistress and Queen, then take me.” And I think this aspect is challenging. This is the one that’s always challenging for me that we can’t do this through our own ego or will, that it’s on God’s terms and God has to come to us. So this balance of working to be ready, but knowing that it’s on God’s terms.

Jim Finley: Yes, this is a deep thing really, I think, is we’re given this taste of oneness. Then we’re given the gift of longing to abide in it. But because the taste of the oneness of love is infinite and we long to abide in it, because having tasted the richness, our life without it will be forever incomplete, where we’re powerless to actualize that. And therefore, so God stole from us our ability to live on our own terms, so only by complete dependence on God. This is why when we were looking at Meister Eckhart, he says, “We’re touched by...” He said, “We must yearn and sigh for it.” He said, “It steals the soul from ourself.” That it steals from the soul the ability to be herself by her own efforts without this love. See?

And so this is what you see, this sighing and moaning. So you’re a robber because you’ve taken from me my agenda of actualizing the union and anything I’m even capable of doing. You took it all away from me because I’m finite. I realized as I was listening to the talk earlier that I was giving. I said this is for Rumi. See? Says, “There’s a field out beyond the boundaries of right and wrong. I’ll take you there.” See? And instead of Rumi, I said the wrong message.

Kirsten Oates: You said Rocha.

Jim Finley: I said Rocha. Rocha didn’t say anything. It was Rumi. Rocha said... They all say this.

Kirsten Oates: Something in the same way.

Jim Finley: And in fact, he did say that in a lot of ways, actually. He did actually. But that direct quote, because all the mystics say it. See? “I have found myself in a place that I couldn’t have found it if I tried because it came to me and found me and took me here unexplainably like this.” See? So God says, “Now that you’re unencumbered from anything you’re even capable of, then now the consummations at hand take me.” See? “Because as long as you were encumbered by all that, you couldn’t take me because your heart was divided. But now that I took all that away from you, see, I even took away from you, you’re still feeling you needed to be able to pull that off and do it because I took it away from you and your inability to take it away. You saw that too, as irrelevant. See? And now this has been achieved in your heart, see, take me, and because I’ve already taken you to myself.” And that’s the union. It’s a lovely passage.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. This is really reminding me now as we’re coming to the final couplet of Teresa of Ávila’s journey through the seven mansions. It’s almost like through 12 mansions to get to this final couplet. “Lady Love, now you have recompensed me a hundred fold on earth. Mistress and Queen, in addition, you may demand God and all his kingdom.” It’s like they’ve made it to that oneness, that sense of...

Jim Finley: That's really true. By the way, when you look at it this way, when you look at this as mystical discernment, each of these mystic teachers have been transformed like this. And many people who are transformed like this are anonymous. It doesn't draw attention to itself. But some people are called to be mystic teachers. And so what they do is they're trying to approach us to help us discern that we're being invited to this. What are the signs of it? How do we respond to it, and what are the different phases that it can go through? And so each mystic has his own way of incrementally devising that, but they're all provisional ways of doing it.

So when we looked at these mystics, we can see that with each one, the night of the senses and the night of the spirit, the active night and the passive night, the seven mansions. Guigo, Lectio Divina, meditation, prayer, they all have these. So they're all provisional approximations of a way that allows us to talk about these unfoldings like this. And so for her, it's laid out this way. But then there's other couplets like this through the whole book, and each couplet has different numbers to it. So we can't get fundamentalistic about it and count them because there's only one thing always being talked about. But then each text is endlessly varied revelations of love's nature. So the more you read her, the metaphorical richness of love gets richer and richer as we see that. And if she could live longer, she might have written 10 more books. You know what I mean?

Kirsten Oates: Wow.

Jim Finley: It's like the Bible says God spoke. I honestly believe that all the books in the whole world couldn't contain everything that Jesus said. See? It's like that. It's like you can't get it into the covers of a book. It overflows.

Kirsten Oates: And it's amazing. Jesus never wrote a book.

Jim Finley: He never did.

Kirsten Oates: He never wrote it down because I guess that would be containing it.

Jim Finley: Yes. That's a good way to say it. It's true he didn't write it down, and the gospels weren't written till some years after his death, really. But I think when we look at the gospels this way, they wrote in such a way that it overflows the pages of the gospel. It was very clear because Jesus overflowed their life, and it's a living Jesus that shines through the pages. Then we meet Jesus.

Kirsten Oates: And through these pages too of Mechthild.

Jim Finley: And to these saints and sages down through the ages that God gives people the gift of putting words, unexplainable things, and it's always overflowing. That's why you go crazy trying to explain her or grasp her because the very you that tries to grasp what she's saying is you that is transcended in realizing what she's talking about. It's like love. The deeper it goes, you're less and less inclined to imagine you could say anything at all that could begin to do justice to what love is. That doesn't mean you can't stammer it out, the voice of the poet, the voice of the lover, but it just overflows the banks of the explainable.

Kirsten Oates: Wonderful.

Jim Finley: And this last point then, you can demand of God and all of his kingdom. And it's because now that you're transformed by God's love into love, you can ask whatever you want and God will give it because you'll no longer ask anything but love. That's why you can ask anything you want, see, because you only ask love.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. That sense of oneness and union, so that's nondistinct.

Jim Finley: Yes, exactly. It's nondistinct. That's right. As we listen to this, those who are graced by following this, you and I, and all those of us who are with us, we can realize we're on the way towards it. We can see this arc of deepening sincerity, like a work in progress being transformed by love into love. And it's the gift of being touched by the mystics.

Kirsten Oates: And the gift of your teaching too, Jim.

Jim Finley: Yeah, exactly. It touched me. It did a number on me. And so really, I think any teacher, I'm doing nothing more than passing on what was passed on to me. Because everything we have, we've been given to give it, and it's in passing it on that it enriches itself in the giving of it.

Kirsten Oates: Well, thank you for today. And thank you, Corey, in the background, always supporting us. And I guess, Jim, if there's any Broadway producers that want us to come and...

Jim Finley: They'll be knocking at our door.

Kirsten Oates: ... contact Corey. That was actually fun reading that with you. Although, I felt very unqualified to be either God or the pure soul of Mechthild.

Jim Finley: Yeah. You know what? This is a movie. I had this fantasy that Brad Pitt would play me teaching the mystics. That's my wild fantasy, but I don't know. I don't know. It's probably a fantasy.

Kirsten Oates: Well, if that's the case, I'll play me-

Jim Finley: There you go.

Kirsten Oates: ... with Brad Pitt.

Jim Finley: There you go, another fantasy.

Kirsten Oates: 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. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.