

Turning
to the
Mystics



Mechtild of Magdeburg

Turning to Mechtild of Magdeburg
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 eight of Turning to the Mystics. And Jim and I are here together and we're very excited to introduce you to our new mystic for season eight. Welcome, Jim.

Jim Finley: Yes, welcome, yes. Good to be back together again. It's good.

Kirsten Oates: So I think you've already announced our new mystic in a previous season, but I'll let you introduce her.

Jim Finley: Yes, I'll begin by saying that we're entering a new phase in this series of reflections on these different mystics, because up till now, each of the mystics we've explored have been mystics that been very much a part of my life since I was in the monastery. I was introduced to them there. I've been reading them over the years and given retreats on them many times.

So now, we're beginning mystics that I've been very aware of for a long time but haven't really sat with in that extended way.

So with Mechtild, my contemplative prayer group at St. Monica's, we'd meet twice a month, and I would give a half hour talk on one of the mystics. Then we would do an hour of sitting and walking meditation. So I spent a year with Mechtild. So I spent a year with her. And in preparing for this podcast I've been getting immersed back in her again. So I'm on a learning curve also with her getting back into the subtleties of her guidance that she gives us.

So with that said, we'll begin as usual with what we know of her, who she was historically, to help us understand and appreciate better who she is spiritually.

Mechtild was born in Germany around the year 1207, where she lived until her death, until around 1282, or possibly as late as 1294. The two main sources that we know about her life is that we know that she was a Beguine. And so, by understanding the Beguines, we can understand a lot about her, because it helps us understand the life that she lived.

So the Beguines was a spiritual renewal movement in Germany of women. There were also men called Beghards. But the women, they lived in community and they committed their life to seeking God in a heartfelt, devotional sincerity of Christ-like discipleship. So it was a spiritual renewal movement of women within the Christian Church in Germany.

And what's different about them is that they didn't live in monasteries. They lived in communities in the world. And also what's different, is they didn't belong to religious order, so they didn't take vows. They weren't Franciscans, or Dominicans, or whatever. So they weren't under a religious superior within a community. And so these were lay women living in community in the world.

They were also very open. If they felt God was calling them to, they could leave and get

married if they wanted to, and have children, and so on, whatever they felt God's will was. And they made their living, they were self-supporting, so they were seamstresses or they did house cleaning. They helped prepare the dead for burial. They did different services. And this was their life, really.

And so really, it's a deep commitment in the world to Christ and to transformation. And in this sense, it echoes Center for Action and Contemplation. In the Center for Action and Contemplation we don't live together in community. But because of cyberspace, we're connected as a spiritual renewal within the Christian tradition. And also on these podcasts we're like the Beguines, in that, all over the world, we're sharing this communal awakening and how we can help each other get closer to God and share it with the world.

The second thing we know about her, is the book that she wrote. She wrote one book. And she spent her whole life writing it. As a matter of fact, this book, called *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, she wrote through her whole life, on up to old age and died. She wrote it while she was dying. In old age at the last two books it's very touching, because she was living in this community with Cistercian nuns and she became blind. She couldn't feed herself, couldn't clothe herself, and she lost all sense of God's presence in life. And she dictated the last two books.

So she comes full circle, being at peace in this utter poverty. And then died that way. So she's an extraordinary person in that way, I think.

So when we're turning to Mechtilde for guidance, we're turning to the guidance she offers in *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, her book.

And also what we know about our life, just the way that she lives, she's mentoring us or modeling for us, this Christ-like life.

Another interesting thing about Mechtilde to be aware of is Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, they share this way through these mystically-awakened Christians. And then they try to offer guidance to help us to discern our awakening, like how to recognize it starting, how to conduct ourselves, and so on. She doesn't do that. She's very much like Julian of Norwich that way. Notice Julian doesn't do any of that either.

So Mechtilde's teaching, actually very much like Julian's, is that what she does, she shares this deepening love between her and God. But she doesn't share it by talking about it, but she lets us in on it with the language of intimacy and bears witness. So as we read it, insofar as we're touched by the beauty of what she's saying about this deepening of this love, we're being guided by her, because the very fact we're touched by it when we hear its beauty, she reveals that we're also being drawn into this love, or we wouldn't be touched by it. And that's how she guides us, I think, that's the intimacy of her teaching.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, can you tell us about when she was first spiritually awakened, what led her on this path?

Jim Finley: Yeah, what she tells us is the awakening occurred when she was 12 years old, where she said she was greeted by the Holy Spirit. But unlike Julian, who gives a detailed account of her awakening, where she was near death and the crucifix, she doesn't tell us what that was. But by the sheer beauty of her words, we get a sense of what it was. So she says her mystical

quickenings, and I think that's the way with us too, sometimes when very young, when we look back, the first stirrings of these tastes of oneness or God's presence, it happens when it happens. But sometimes it happens when we're quite young, and we learn to grow and being faithful to it over the years. So that's what we know of her teaching.

Kirsten Oates: I wonder how old she would've been when she joined the Beguine community?

Jim Finley: Oh, we don't know.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: That's a good question. I don't know how old she would've been.

Kirsten Oates: Quite young. So she had the mystical awakening. We know she had this big mystical awakening at 12 years old that led her to this life of joining the Beguines and wanting to write this book.

Jim Finley: That's right. And the whole book and her whole life is the deepening of that one awakening.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, okay, yes.

Jim Finley: So she was touched. And also, it foreshadowed, that she is being drawn to it, to the awakening, through all of eternity. And in other words she's saying, it's just like us. We're touched and we learn the wavering ways to be true to it. But the truth to the love of which she speaks and we sit with is eternal. And she's speaking of the externality of this love bond that begins now when we're still on earth.

Another thing about Mechtild, she can be intimidating in the sense of, all the mystics, I guess, can be intimidating, but she speaks to this awakening of this love. And as we read it, it might be way beyond anything we've ever experienced. And also, as we read her, probably way beyond anything we're likely to experience. Like, this woman's out there like this.

And therefore, what's her relevance? I think this is important. And to me, this is what helps me to see it. Is something we said before in previous mystics. In the Tao Te Jing, the Flowing Light of the Dao, which is really the Flowing Light of the Godhead, like the flowing divinity through all of life. He says, "The Dao is like water. It seeks the lowest places to give life that all that lives."

And so the flowing of God's love is infinite. So it's infinitely pouring out the infinity of itself all as to the point that it infinitely gives itself away as the very lowest point at which we even begin to realize it. So we live in incremental realizations of infinite generosity. So the very first increments are, true, they're very limited, but it's a limited perception of infinity.

Another example that I have, you want a small child delights in something. We don't make fun of them because of how simplistic they are. We don't laugh at them or what

do they know? To the contrary, in their delight, they delight us. See and they delight us because God's the infinity of delight. So she takes us where we are and reminds us that it's boundaryless in all directions in the sincere simplicity of it. And that's always helped me understand her. And all these mystics, I see them that way, too. I think it's an encouraging way to see it, other than there's some place I'm trying to get to, I wonder if I'll ever get to before I get started? It's already unexplainably begun by your desire to open your heart to the mystery that's awakened you. So that is ribboned all through her teachings, I think.

And I'd like to share some opening words of the book one of the Flowing Light of the Godhead so you can see how she talks. And I'd like to comment on it, give a sense of what we'll be doing here.

These are her opening words. "This book I hereby send as a messenger to all religious people, both bad and good. For if the pillars fall, the building cannot remain standing. And it signifies me alone and proclaims in praiseworthy fashion, my intimacy, all who wish to understand this book should read it nine times." That's how she starts.

Now, here's what's stunning about Mechtild. When she says, "This book I hereby send as a messenger to all religious people, both good and bad and good, but the pillars fall. The building cannot remain standing and it signifies me alone." The me is not Mechtild. It's God. In other words, she feels very free to speak as God, because she senses that God has been so opened her up that God uses her as a conduit for God to speak through. She has that confidence about her.

And I have to give an example of this, too, where I think she can help us get in touch with this.

Say you're with somebody, someone you care about a lot and they're really struggling with something, overwhelming to them. And you say something to them out of your sincere love for them. And what you say helps. And you don't know how you knew how to say that. That's the point like this.

And likewise, I think too, poets and artists, they get started, but when it catches fire and it starts rolling out, the poet doesn't know how he or she knew how to say those words because they were flowing through her. When the beauty comes out in colors for an artist, they don't know how they knew to do that. And that voice that speaks to us at that time is God. We're all conduits of God.

And so she's trying to help us calibrate our hearts to be sensitive to this conduit like this flow that's flowing through all of us in these different ways. And I think that's a helpful way to understand her as she tries to help us understand ourselves like this.

And when she says this to, she says, "For the pillars fall, the building cannot remain standing."

And what are the pillars? The pillars are this love. As long as we're basing on structures and I think I'll ever get there, what do I understand and what do I understand? What

do I agree with? The pillars are, it's falling, the building is falling. But when we realize we're being sustained by the upwelling of this love that's flowing through us and as us carrying us through our days, it stands in that love. I think that's an important, subtle point for her when she says that.

And she says, "Ah, Lord God, who made this book?" So now she's her talking to God.

"I made it in my powerlessness for I cannot restrain myself as to my gifts."

In other words, what she's revealing to us is that God's the one who made the book. Like a faithful scribe, she's taking dictation from God. And God wrote it. And in God's powerlessness to do anything less than completely giving the infinity of God away to us as the beloved in our wayward ways. "I freely chose not to be able to help myself, to give myself to you, and your confusion, and your loss," and so on, which she sees as the heart of the Gospel. The Good News is that the flowing in of the deep. So the deep acceptance of our utter poverty is the portal through which the love of God flows into us and carries us out beyond ourself into this love like this. And this intermingling of poverty, and love, and generosity.

I would say something else about her, too. Is that, in a way, then, she's playing a violin with just one string on it, which is love. But the more you listen to it's the beauty of the whole orchestra. See, it's the beauty that permeates the reverberations of all the various aspects of this. So even though she just stays on point that she never leaves this love, she makes these stunning statements about love. Like, where did that come from? Seriously? So when we sit with her, we learn these endless variations are unfolding in us. And it's endlessly evocative. And she helps us to be sensitized, surrendering ourself over to that flow.

So what she says in this later book, which we'll look at in one of the later talks, she says where God says to her that the way He puts it to her is that He's so freely chosen to be so hopelessly in love with her. He quite honestly doesn't know if he could handle being God without her. And she says, take me home with You. I'll be your physician forever.

And the power of that is, as we receive, we're reading that we know that it's true of us, that God has so freely chosen to be so hopelessly in love with us, God doesn't know if God can handle being God without us and our brokenness. See? And she says, "Take me home with You. I'll be your physician forever."

It circulates back around. And we give back to God the gift that God longs for, which is us.

Sometimes, I used to put it, what if we die and we're facing God? And we say, I used to listen to Turning to the Mystics Podcast. We're trying to see what we could say to get in. And God listens and I read the scriptures. But what if God's not interested in our spirituality? What if God's interested in us?

And so God says to her in this same passage, she says, "What do you want of me?"

He says, "I want you to let me rest weightlessly in your soul, that's all I want. Because it's everything."

And it's weightless because it has no credentials, it has no name, it isn't earned, it can't be attained, it can't be lost. It's us.

"And when you let Me rest there, it'll reveal to you that place in you is capable of letting Me rest there, which is the you that I created as My beloved."

And so that's where the union takes place for her and all of us. And so to sit with her and read her so we might read her, it's true of all the mystics, and be taken by the beauty of what she says, and sit in silence, and ask God to deepen our capacity to realize how the love of what she speaks is already unfolding within us. And how to be faithful of that to carry it through the day. And I think that's the trustworthy guidance that Mechtild offers us.

Three concluding thoughts. One is that when you think about it, also, I think, for any poet, or anyone who's deeply moved by poetry, or for any artist, or anyone deeply moved by art, or by any composer, or musician, or performer, anyone who's moved by music, in so far as there's a rich vibrancy to their fidelity to that, or also service to community in some way, like destiny, like a calling like this, you realize that at the very center of it all is an invisible, quiet unfolding of some unexplainable giving of itself to you is pouring out, like you're being faithful to the unfolding of something of what loves is asking out of you. And in your fidelity to what it asks, you're enriched and you're channeling love through the teaching. Or it might be through silence. Or it might be through solitude.

Whatever it is for you, it is engraved in your heart. And it can shift and move as you go through life, which is always trying to bring us to the center that flows out and touches everything in all directions. And I think that's another.

So what is that place in us, the way we put it in a previous session? See, to find that person, to find that relationship, to find that act, to find that community, which, when you give yourself over to it with your whole heart, it unravels your petty preoccupation with your self-absorbed self and brings you strangely home to yourself near your origin like this. And so we're always learning in a little closer so it might flow more freely through us, whatever the modality is that we're called to like this.

Another thing I think is very helpful with her, is that she's so different than Eckhart. And she's so different in the sense that she...Eckhart is so different from all the previous mystics we've been looking, [inaudible], because Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, and Julian of Norwich were love mystics. She's a love mystic. So it's this understanding of God as love, and being transformed by infinite love into love, is nuptial love mystic.

But Eckhart knows Eckhart doesn't talk that way. He really doesn't. Eckhart talks about a knowing. And likewise, the love of the mystics is a paradoxical love. And it's the love that as we surrendered to it, it unravels our inability to live on our terms. It unravels our ability to live on our terms through love. Like look what's become of me.

So the knowledge of Eckhart is paradoxical knowledge. It begins with the path of detachment. It's not the acquisition of acquiring something, it's letting go of all images, all ideas of God, of everything. And the more your knowledge becomes stripped, a configurations of knowledge, the birth of the word occurs like this.

But the thing is, I think two things, the path of love and the path of knowledge are modalities of being transformed by infinity into infinity.

And the second point is if the emphasis is on the knowing, the love is always there. Eckhart wants that. I honestly believe if we just live by love, we wouldn't need to say any of this stuff.

But likewise, if we live by love, the knowing is there. It's like the ones people we really know are the people we really love. And the people we really love are the people that we know. And likewise, we really know ourselves if we learn to love ourselves as we are. And who we have learned to love ourselves, we really know ourselves.

As God knows us and so on. And so it's a matter of emphasis where if one language is in the forefront, the other is always there and it can shift back and forth. But it's the co-mingling of these two modes, of conduits, that converge on the path. And I think that's a helpful distinction to make. And another thing to make is if we look at the contemplative traditions of the world religions, of all of them, so in every world of religion, it has its own mystical heritage, Kabbalah, Yoga, Zen, whatever it is, is that we can see that the nuptial mystics are much, much closer, are very, very close and resonate deeply with mystical Islam, the Sufis, Rumi and Hafis, and so on.

Rumi says, "Oh, light that fills my room. The moth that circles you as my soul." He has this stunning love language like this.

And Hafis also, you get the same thing.

And it is also very close to the Bhakti yoga, to the [foreign language], to the love path. And so we see in Bhakti yoga, and I think also in the Sikhs, and the guru of the love poetry of the Sikh, we see the emphasis of this love tradition, and the knowledge dimension is always there. It's a voice of a knowing through transformation and love.

It's for Meister Eckhart in this sense then, he's always closer to Buddhism, in this sense of satori. So the Buddha, you don't hear the Buddha speaking about ecstasies and it's not an ecstatic tradition. The four noble truths and the eightfold path, it's a deep knowing beyond knowing like this.

But likewise, in Buddhism, the love is always there, because unless you had a love for the desire to be so awakened, you wouldn't seek it. And also the Buddha Safa, see the Buddha Safa is a one, who having reached the final liberation Parinirvana of Buddha nature, chooses instead to be repeatedly reborn thousands of times until all sentient beings are saved. Until everyone gets through, I'm not going to go through, which is Christ. See, you see this love consciousness in the knowing and you see the knowing.

So Mechtild says, she says "Love without knowledge." I forget her word, I think yours were lost. Knowledge without love were lost. But it's in the alchemy of this love infused knowledge that this path of God continues.

So that's my sense of her, of the tone of her, and what the session is about, and looking at her.

Kirsten Oates: Well, I'm very excited to get into Mechtild.

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

Kirsten Oates: I do have some questions for you, Jim.

Jim Finley: Sure.

Kirsten Oates: One is around the worldview of the mystics. And what I love about these female mystics is that they haven't gone to seminary. They have no theological underpinnings to what they teach. And so this worldview of the mystics seems to come more out of experience than theological understanding. And would you say that Mechtild follows the worldview of the mystics we've already studied?

Jim Finley: I would in this sense, in this sense. First of all, you look at Eckhart or taught these people, it's true they have that theological knowledge. It's very interesting when John of the Cross is writing his commentary, I believe, on the spiritual canticle, he's dedicating it to his sister in Carmel. And he says, "You won't understand this," but in the sense you don't understand it because you've not learned theology.

And he doesn't say this, you haven't learned theology because the Church won't let you. You're a woman, only men are allowed. And he said, "But you will understand it." See, because it's love.

And so what you find in these learned mystics who do have the theology, it's transconceptual knowing, rather than getting trapped in the conceptualizations. It's really conceptualizations as poetic metaphors that invite and lead us beyond a deeper way to understand what it means to understand.

But it's really true with Mechtild, and you see it with Julian, and we're going to see it with some of the others also that we're going to look at. I think that's really true. And so you can see the wisdom that shines. And it's not a wisdom learned in the school. You don't get it out of books.

By the way, the wisdom, the wisdom in Eckhart, he didn't get it out of books, either. The wisdom, he didn't get out. But through the books, he went beyond the books, beyond the books. And so you do see this because, she's so, Mechtild is so brilliant. It's also literature. She was very gifted from the standpoint of literature like an educated, a brilliant person who, just shines. Yeah, it's true.

Kirsten Oates: And this love and knowledge that comes out of this experience of God, it's not the kind of love or knowledge that we experience in our finite minds and hearts. So would you say the love, it's beyond the day-to-day feeling love that we have for each other?

Jim Finley: Yes and no. First of all, basically, yes. For example, in terms of, say, an intimate love relationship, all that you know of the beloved, that you're able to put words to, who do you know the beloved to be in your love for the beloved is qualitatively beyond that.

So likewise though, there's day-by-day conceptual knowledge of nature, of the world, of

science. But here's the point, and that's really true. But I think there's a sensitivity to that knowledge that you're at the cusp of something shining through. It's beyond the closure of the present definition. Does that make sense?

You get the feeling, you haven't exhausted it by defining it. But in the definition, when you sit with it leads you on and on into layers, and layers, and layers, and layers. And we say eventually then, the infinity of that luring process beyond is God.

Kirsten Oates: So it's interesting to me that she encourages us to read her book nine times, because it's almost cutting through what we think we know about love or what we think the experience of love is to recalibrate ourselves to the kind of love she experienced in her encounter with God.

Jim Finley: Yes. I want to talk about this for a minute where repetition is not redundancy. I want to speak of it in Christian language of the liturgical year. And say, when Christmas comes, we celebrate the birth of Christ. You might say, I did that already. Got anything new back there? But like a spiral staircases, as we grow older every time it circles around. So it's a non-repetitive realization of, that's what I mean by incremental realizations of infinite generosity.

Where there's monks at the monastery, they chant the Psalms every day, the saltro for the week, and they've been doing it for years. They know it by heart, a lot of them. But it isn't like, "Oh, my God, this is so boring. I've done this. What else you got back there?"

So it endlessly gives itself to us and the unfoldings of things as we stay with it. So nine times then, it's a very, that's what it's being alluded to. So you read it once, you could read this once, cover-to-cover, and you could also read it, we talked about this before, you could also even read it, and outline it, and comment on it.

And then when you're done, it might take you two years to get through it like that, like a practice, take a break and then go back and start all over again. And then go back and start all over again and repeat until death.

So when you're on your deathbed, maybe someone has to read it to you. See, very deep. And I think we need that. But that very deep place we get to is already giving itself to us as the present place we've gotten to and our sensitivity that there's infinitely more. Matter of fact, there's infinitely more than more. There's infinitely more than the most, giving itself to us and touching us right here like this. And all these mystics had that tone about them, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. So that theme we've had through all these mystics of how do we calibrate our hearts to the presence of God that's always present with us? Mechtild. She's offering a path for that which is to invite us into this dialogue between her and God to recalibrate ourselves to that.

Jim Finley: That's exactly right. It's like endless never ends. And the rehearsals for heaven because we're going to be doing this forever like this. And so she steps us into this path, this intimate way.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful.

I do remember when we were talking about the Beguines last season that, in the end they were persecuted, so the Dominicans were supportive of them, but in the end, they were

persecuted and disbanded by the Church. Is that right?

Jim Finley: Yes. Because the thing is, the Dominicans did support like Meister Eckhart. And matter of fact, her spiritual director was a Dominican and he's the one who encouraged her to keep writing. But the thing is, because they weren't in a religious community under a superior, and because they weren't directly answerable, and they weren't educated, to have people claiming they could talk like this outside the clerical oversight. And they saw it as they needed to rein it in.

And it isn't as if it wasn't subject to confusion because it is, you can go off the deep end in all kinds of ways. But little, by little, by little, they actually shut down the whole thing. They just closed it down.

But that's why The Living School is an example. It rises up, it gets shut down and it appears somewhere else. You know what I mean? But you're right, it shows you the seduction of the Church to empire, to control. So Richard Rohrer's idea of the new orthodoxy is to return to the original orthodoxy of love.

Kirsten Oates: Which is what all these mystics are teaching us about.

Jim Finley: That's what they're all. And the contemplative of reading of the Gospels is the one thing that Jesus was always teaching. It's the way everything he says is falling off a cliff. You'll never, never get to the bottom of it because it has no bottom. It's the bit like welling up of God's voice in the world. So when we sit with an open heart and hear Jesus speaking, we're there, we're in that depth dimension of daily life.

Kirsten Oates: And all these mystics are grounded in the Gospels, aren't they? That was...

Jim Finley: They are.

Kirsten Oates: ... their core understanding that they draw from?

Jim Finley: Very much so. All of them. Very, very much so.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Well, I did wonder, you said sometimes she talks as God if that was one of the reasons the Church didn't like the Beguines to have that kind of confidence?

Jim Finley: Yes. What they didn't like is claiming a source of spiritual authority outside of the hierarchical structures. It isn't just that it isn't subject to misguidedness.

One of my rotations for my doctorate I worked on a locked psychiatric units, two different hospitals. And there was one person on the locked psychiatric unit had religious delusions, and the person thought he was Jesus, street person, thought he was Jesus. And then another person they brought into the same unit, he thought he was Jesus. They didn't like each other. So you can go crazy. You know what I mean?

Admittedly. But they felt so need to reign it in, to watch over it, and having control over it. And it's sad. It has a worthwhile sensitivity to watch over it, but it's seduction of empire, it

overstates its case.

Kirsten Oates: And she also has some parts in her book where she's criticizing the Church. Is that right?

Jim Finley: Yes. Catherine of Sienna does this too. What she's doing, a lot of it's this lyrical love language. But then it's just like Thomas Merton in the monastery, this contemplative union with God. And then he wrote *Seeds of Destruction*. Dr. Martin Luther King against the Vietnam War, the nuclear war, the thing. And so what you see then, is see where does the mystical awakening translate itself into the justice of response to the suffering of the world and how it's given to you to do that.

And so what she was accusing the Church for was not being grounded in this love. Which didn't help her cause any, because another thing that she lived with is the threat of persecution or being called a heretic. But she said, "I cannot not do it. I cannot not do it."

And part of her integrity I think, is that she lived with that and continued on knowing in her heart she was called to do and she did it. I think we're called to do that, too.

Kirsten Oates: Very similar to Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross who we studied, who were trying to reform the Church.

Jim Finley: During the Inquisition. And another example of Church, misguidedness of the Church exactly, speaking truth to power through the truth of love to power, yeah, even at the price of your own life.

Thomas Merton once said, "The word martyr means witness. But the martyr and being the martyr doesn't give up on life. The martyr bears witness to the illusion of having life."

And so this love always calls us out beyond the edges, like prophetic voice. However it's given to us to do that. And in our own way, living alone, we can have that prophetic, vulnerable immediacy to us in our marriage, or children, or dealing with a terminal illness, or teaching. It is a calling. As it gives itself to you, you seek to follow it.

Kirsten Oates: It's integrity to love. It comes out of the love.

Jim Finley: Incarnate. And this sincerity, it's deep awakening, intimately lived. And open to be constantly open to new insights to see what God has in mind next.

Kirsten Oates: It's amazing that she could write such a big book just on one topic, on love. It does show the endless nature.

Jim Finley: That's an interesting point. What's really true, it will be true if love was a topic.

Love is a topic, you're going to get over it. I think 50 pages would do it. But the topic of love isn't love. You can be well-versed in the topic of love. I have this image I share sometimes is imagine a woman who studies God, anyone who studies God in this way. And they became so proficient, they're like a God-ologist. And they write books. But for all those words, all those words, it doesn't necessarily mean that they've realized this realization beyond words.

Thomas Merton once said, "We don't need more people to write more books on prayer."

Like you said by the fireplace, sipping tea, writing, underlining beautiful, we don't need more people to read more books on prayer. We need people to close the books and pray. But there's books that can help us to close the books. And these mystics are one of them. The Gospel is one of them, the Book of Life.

Kirsten Oates: And in the book you said, we are taken into a dialogue that's happening between Mechtild and God, and it started when she was 12 years old. But the dialogue continues, is that right? She's in a constant dialogue with God,

Jim Finley: And it's also a dialogue without words. Like in intimacy, there's a dialogue of love and the words get so deep, the words stop. So I think all her words are like that. I think there's a union that gives birth to a word that is so deeply evocative, the words fall back into song. And when we read her, we can feel that same rhythm in us. We read the word, but if it really gets to us, we don't just read the next sentence, we stop. It's like skimming over the death deprivation. I'm going to skim onto the next sentence. And what she just said is something I'm going to ask God to help me to taste this within my soul.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, you're taken somewhere for a moment in your whole out of time, in a way, isn't it? That feeling being taken?

Jim Finley: And there's another insight about these mystics, is that there are certain words when you're in this, you're silenced by it. So then there are certain words that break the silence because you can't bear the intimacy, whatever. But there's certain words that don't break the silence, the rhythm and cadence of the words embody the silence. So the living logos is a word, like the monks chanting the song. It's not a word that breaks the silence. And so these are the words of lovers. These are the cry of the poor, the healing voice, the voice of the poet, the voice of this. So there are certain word, the logos, the living word, the resonances, yes.

Kirsten Oates: And Jim, just looking at the book, it's a dialogue between the soul and God, is that right?

Jim Finley: She goes back and forth. She helps us get aspects of ourself. So sometimes it's between her soul and God and God and her soul. Sometimes it's between her soul and her body. So she keeps moving back and forth. And so, in these dialogues like a little watching a play. So what it does, it gets past linear, explanatory ways of looking at these different aspects of ourselves in the presence of God.

Kirsten Oates: Could you help us understand how she sees the soul, given that she does go back and forward in these ways?

Jim Finley: Well, first of all, let's say the soul, for her, the soul, different levels to it. One, I say, by the soul, she means the interiority of ourselves is our soul. And in the interiority of ourselves, we talked about before, the powers of the soul, the interior dimensions of knowing, the interior dimensions of memory, the interior dimensions of desire, the interior dimensions of feelings, and so on. And so these deepening dimensions of the aspect of the soul, we realize then also what the soul is then is that it's the sense of the self being created by God in the image and likeness of God is the soul.

So the soul is the medium through which, or the experiential immediacy of realizing the Beloved, that we are created by God in the image and likeness of God is the soul. And I

think she also means by the soul, Theresa puts it this way also, that if we think of heaven, it's where God lives. And says, we know God is within us. Our soul is God's heaven and God's waiting for us there, like we're trapped on the outer circumference of the interiority of our own soul in which God, whom the whole world cannot contain, is waiting for us in the inwardness that cause us to express this love. That's the way it helps me to understand it.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, that's really helpful.

One last question. I wonder for you, Jim, what it's like to approach a mystic you're not as familiar with. So for us listening to the podcast, this is probably the first time we've heard this mystic, but we may have listened to other seasons and have a sense of the mystic. So how do you approach a new, well, not new for you, but mystic you're not as familiar with?

Jim Finley: This is my sense of it. I'll give an example that comes to me.

I saw a video, Isaac Perlman, the violinist, and he was teaching Julliard. He was teaching gifted students, mentoring them, one-on-one. And so he would say to the student, "Play this," there would be like Mozart, or Brahms, whatever, and the student would play it. And he says, "See this phrasing right here like this? He said, do it a little more like this." And so he listens. So part of the student's ability as a gifted student, the student can follow that. That's what makes them gifted. But there's something else he's listening for.

He's listening for the call note, like Roka says, of the flowing of a beauty that transcends the one playing it. And it's flowing through this person and he recognizes it.

And therefore, it's like it contemplation recognizes itself. So when we pick up a new mystic, that particular mystic's new. But as soon as they strike that cord, incarnate infinity intimately realized, you're already familiar with who they are. And that can be also to another religion. You can also sit and open this with Merton. You can open the sutras or whatever it is. There's some poets too, you can pick up, it hits a certain intimate immediacy on sayable things, and it rings true. That's my sense of it.

Kirsten Oates: That's really helpful because as you say, she doesn't outline a path. So we're not going to be giving a lot of tools or guidance. She doesn't offer the tools or guidance that we've had in previous seasons. But this way of being open to the-

Jim Finley: I want to say something also, too. Let's say there's a certain order, like Theresa with the seven mansions, seven degrees. Or St. John of the Cross. It talks about journey to God through a passage through a dark night. Then there's the night of the senses, the appetites, the active night, and the passive night. Passively, it happens to us. Actively, we cooperate with it. Then the night of the spirit happens to us, we cooperate with it. And we can look at how it goes through these stages in a way. And the cloud of unknowing, Alexio, meditation and prayer, which then opens out upon and prepares for contemplation and so on.

But here's the thing, really, it's an order properly followed that transcends the order. So it isn't like you do the four noble truths of the Buddha. Got that one nailed. Check it off. Or 12 steps of sobriety. I think I got the first step covered. I'll move on. I'm ready for the second one. You're never finished the first one, 12 steps. And so the Gospels, so there's a certain order and the exercises of Ignatius too, on visualizing images of Jesus and so on. There's a

certain order that helps maintain and lead us to this point of overflow like this. But then there's certain people, like her, there is no order. But at an underlying order, it's love's order. It isn't chaos, by any means, anyways. Yeah, exactly.

Kirsten Oates: That's lovely. So we can just relax and open our hearts to the love she might be resonating with?

Jim Finley: That's exactly right. And know as we read her, she's really helping us to surrender to a love that's already begun. Otherwise, we wouldn't be touched by the teachings of the mystics.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, I was going to say that we're already on the path.

Jim Finley: We're already on the path.

Kirsten Oates: Because we're listening to this. Yeah.

Jim Finley: That's right. Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: And Jim, you've enjoyed coming back to her for this season?

Jim Finley: Very much so. Sitting with her a lot, really outlining her, and just trying to put words to it, and paraphrasing has been a real gift for me. She's so beautiful and poignant. Yeah, beautiful.

Kirsten Oates: Well, thank you so much for sharing her with us and looking forward to the season ahead. And we did just want to let people know about the book we're using.

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: So it's Mechtild of Magdeburg, the Flowing Light of the Godhead, translated and introduced by Frank Tobin, and it's from Paulist Press.

Jim Finley: And as part of the Classics of Western Spirituality series of Paulist Press did a beautiful job of putting out these classical works. And so it's in that series. So that's what we're using.

Kirsten Oates: Okay, wonderful. And you're probably using an older version than most of us will get.

Jim Finley: Well, I think I may be using an older edition.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. An older edition.

Jim Finley: I don't think they changed it.

Kirsten Oates: Okay.

Jim Finley: Mine is, yeah, it probably is. I've had it for quite a while.

Kirsten Oates: Looks well-worn. Wonderful. Okay, well, thank you for this wonderful introduction, Jim, and look forward to this season.

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.