

Turning
to the
Mystics



Mechthild of Magdeburg

Mechtild of Magdeburg: Dialogue 3
with James Finley and Kirsen Oates

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Kirsten Oates: Welcome everyone to season eight of Turning to the Mystics, where we've been turning to the German Mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg, a student of Eckhart's. I'm here with Jim and we are going to talk together about Jim's third session. Welcome, Jim.

Jim Finley: Thank you. Yes, thank you. Glad to be continuing on with Mechthild. She's such a beautiful mystic to study.

Kirsten Oates: Yes. I absolutely loved the third session, and I read along with the text and I was curious, you chose three different parts of the book and pulled them together for that episode. I was wondering what thread is there.

Jim Finley: Yes. My sense is this, of course in the whole series of Turning to the Mystics, we're really not studying the thought of any mystics. For example, if we would do St. John of the Cross, when I did the contempt prayer group at St. Monica's, I'd spend a year on one mystic. If we were going to do John of the Cross, we would've done a whole year, which would be a very worthwhile thing to do. But what we're doing is just singling out beautiful passages that shed light on helping us deepen our experience of God's presence in our life.

That's one criteria for choosing these passages. The second criteria, for me, is in terms I try to choose passages that are as accessible as possible and that we can resonate with the dimensions of love she's talking about. It has to do with that pastoral practicality in terms of following this path and ways we can recognize what she's talking about. We get reverberations of it within ourself.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, lovely. Well, I'm looking forward to digging into the passages you chose. If it's okay with you, Jim, we'll turn to the first one that you read, which was from book two, and it starts at the very bottom of page 91.

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: I wondered if we could just go through some of the sentences and phrases. They're all so deep and it'd be nice to hear your reflections. Reading the first one. Yeah. "Lord, heavenly Father, between you and me, there goes unceasingly, an imperceptible breath in which I come to know and see many marvels and inexpressible things."

Jim Finley: Here, she's, I think, poetically a bearing witness to the imagery of the breath where God is perpetually, like exhaling the infinity of God, the very reality of God, like exhaling in a self donating act. Exhaling out, as the gift and the miracle of our very presence and our nothingness without God. Then deep within us, there is also, God breathes into us the capacity to recognize that and exhale ourself back into the breath of God. That point there, that communion is a foundational abyss-like unit of reality that is the reality of yourself and God.

She's saying that is the reality of yourself between us. Then she's saying that, this is what her whole book is about. Her whole book is following a path of love in which that reciprocity of love becomes more and more explicit. She's inviting us to follow that path too, because although, it's always there from God. Right now, God's exhaling herself as us being present

to this talk, but we're not necessarily always exhaling ourselves as a gift to God. We waver. She's trying to draw us towards a more unwavering constancy, of the constancy of love that's always sustaining us in our inconsistencies. That's kind of what she's setting up here, I think, poetically. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: The next sentence, this is another theme that comes through the passages you chose. "Unfortunately, they do me little good, because I'm such a worthless vessel that cannot endure your slightest spark."

Jim Finley: Whenever the mystics talk this way, "I am a worthless vessel." Thomas Merton once said in a conference at the monastery, he said, "We should never confuse spiritual truths by interpreting them psychologically." For example, humility is not an inferiority complex. When she says, "I'm a worthless vessel," you don't get the feeling at all that she's walking around feeling like a worthless person. She feels like she's very present, but rather she's in touch with a certain fallenness or a certain propensity for weakness that's within us all in this exiled state. But she's sensitive to that spiritually. But as a confident, clear-minded, love-filled woman, she's inviting us to model that also.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. Well that's helpful to understand that difference. Yeah. Because in reading it, it can feel like low self-esteem in a way to speak about yourself like that. But we'll unpack that a little bit more in the next section, I think. Yeah. Then she goes on to talk about this unbound love. "Unbound love dwells in the senses, because it is still mixed in such a way with earthly things that a person can cry out. Love is in grace, distant in the senses and has alas not yet climbed the soul."

Jim Finley: Let's say, I want to use married love as an example. This is one of these nuptial mystics too. That's the primary metaphor. Nuptial love. Is that two people fall in love and they marry because they've fallen in love. But what they also discover in their years together, that their love for each other is unbound and that it waivers. There's withholding, there's resentment, there's indifference, there's a lack of caring, there's a lack of... and they bring it in like this.

They have to discover they need to do love's work, because it's unbound, it waivers and drifts. They're always doing love's work to mature, to stabilize in the ways of love. She's saying this unbound love with God, it dwells in the senses. It dwells in the senses in this sense, it dwells in the senses in that if I'm not capable of being gratified in the senses with the consolations of God or the felt sense of God, I don't think God's anywhere around. If I'm not gratified, like why do it?

It's unbound from the infinite love of God, because it's so bound up and monitoring how gratified I am in my finite senses. She's trying to point out how we're all walking around in this state, because she's going to show us the path to be healed from unbound love. She's saying, in various ways, we're all like... Yet in the hidden center of ourselves, the breath of love is there, But it's Buried under the unbound waywardness of things. We're trying to find our way to that oneness in the breath, the breath of love.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, would it be true to say that the moments, whether it's between a married couple, siblings, parent and child, or friends, that those moments when we are reactive, we've lost touch with how much we love the person and how much the person might love us and we're

just kind of caught in our sensory reactivity or misreading the situation?

Jim Finley: Yes, I think so. But I'd like to say this as a therapist too, like couples therapy. See, we are reactive. I was once attending a course with Maureen on instructions on doing couples therapy. They said to help married couples argue effectively, when the person says something in anger, they should always say something like, "I hear you saying..." He said, "This works very fine if you're St Francis of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. But the trouble is you get ticked off." We do get reactive, and here's the point.

I get reactive, but realizing I got reactive, let's talk about it. The willingness to bring out in the open the reactivity, like reading between the lines and walk with it, being very careful that the tone of voice and what you say will have the best possible chance of eliciting the response you're hoping for, which is empathy, insight. Really, the tripping places, reactivities, are actually the growing places. The trouble is often we're reluctant to do the hard work of talking about the tripping places and they can build up inside of us as unspoken distances and so on.

Then she said there's something very similar between ourselves and God, a kind of becoming disheartened by our slow progress or disheartened by our indifference, whatever. But instead of bringing it to God and listening to God speak to us about being infinitely in love with us and our brokenness, we walk around and just drift away. She's trying to find a way to see where unbound love has, within it, doorways to this deeper bound love, by learning to recognize those places.

Kirsten Oates: Well, let's read what she has to say about bound love. She says on page 92, "Bound love dwells in the soul and transcends human senses and concedes the body nothing it wants. It is restrained and very calm. It lowers its wings and listens for the inexpressible voice and gazes into the incomprehensible light and works with great desire to achieve the will of the Lord."

Jim Finley: That's very poetic, but let's look at it kind of. I think she's so good at helping us to sit with the poetics of the subtle ways of love. She's so unhurried and clear about it. We need to sit with her imagery to get it. Let's say this, I want to pick up with this thing about the soul lowering its wings. I want to start there.

Let's say this, what's it mean to lower our wings? I think it means this, any attempt that I make to ascend by my own powers, like to open my wings and fly to you. Any attempt on my finite powers to ascend to you fails to understand the nature of the situation. Because the nature of the situation is this, when it comes to your love for me, there is nothing in my power, by my finite powers, to find my way to your love. But nor do I need to, because your infinite love has already found its way to me as the beloved in my finite powers.

The very fact that I even think I need to fly to you by my powers fails to graph you're already within me, infinitely in love with me in the inadequacy of my finite powers. Just like I'm powerless to bring myself into existence and I'm powerless to keep myself in existence by virtue of death, I'm absolutely powerless to be anything other than infinitely loved by you and my powerlessness. That's really what I think she's getting

at here.

Kirsten Oates: She goes on to say, “If the body can still flap its wings, the soul can never reach the heights that are attained for human beings. In this bound love, the wounded soul becomes rich, and her exterior seems very poor because the more riches God finds in her, the deeper she humbly lowers herself because of the true nobility of her love.”

Jim Finley: This is also a very subtle thing. She’s talking about the body. Let’s say in a kind of ego-based experience of our own body that anything that we can bodily achieve through bodily effort is very limited or impoverished compared to seeing how the body embodies the love of the beloved. Because if the body embodies the love of the beloved, this is what yoga is all about. The namaste, the yogi were yoked to God in our body, it’s incarnate infinity, intimately realized in the body.

But this requires kind of settling into the deeper recesses of our body that embodies this love. Going beyond superficial possessive attitudes towards our own body. She’s saying something else or two in the light of this too, is that she says, “It lowers its wings and listens for the inexpressible voice.” It’s like you’re listening for the voice. It’s heard in ways it’s not expressed. I’d like to reflect on that in just a minute. This has a lot to do with psychotherapy too.

In an intimate conversation with the lover, the beloved, the friend, whatever, there’s what the beloved says, but the more you love the person, the more you can hear in what they’re saying, the unexpressed thing, either because they themselves are not yet ready to share it or they themselves are not yet consciously aware that it’s there and you’re kind of intuiting it. But you hear this deeper unexpressed love expressing itself and the love that is expressed. A lot of psychotherapy is that way too, like this layering of listening where you’re in the presence of someone, the therapist who invites you over and over to pause and listen at the feeling level to what you just said.

We’re always skimming over the surface, the said word hides the unsaid, this begging and waiting to come out into the open, which is intimacy. That’s a lovely little subtle thing about this. Another way to put it too with creation is if we’re talking about the living word of God, speaking the whole universe into existence, I shared that when I sit at the monastery, I used to sit in prayer and I would try to sit so quiet that I could hear God speaking me and the whole world into being, see, because God is speaking the whole world. Could I become so quiet that I could hear this, an expressed word being expressed as my breath, my life, the sun moving across the sky.

She’s alluding to these subtle kinds of listening and hearing of this. Secondly, then she uses the imagery of light and gazes into the incomprehensible light. You’re gazing into the depths of what’s incomprehensible. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness grasps it not, although the darkness can’t grasp it, the darkness can sit and wait and surrender to it, and the light shines to the darkness that it can’t grasp. It’s like seeing, shining through the light, the unseen light of God, and it’s like hearing in the words, the unexpressed word. She’s these layering of subtle union where union occurs and she’s trying to help us learn to be sensitized like this.

Kirsten Oates: Can you talk about what she means when she says, “In this bounded love, the wounded soul becomes rich?” What’s the wounding?

Jim Finley: Here’s how I saw it. Each of the listeners could share what they see in it too, because it’s intentionally evocative. I see it. Here’s what I see in it, thinking about it. In this bound love that is each hunt to each in this deep love. In this bound love, the wounded soul becomes rich. The soul is wounded in the acceptance of its woundedness. That’s one way it’s wounded.

Then it discovers in the acceptance of its woundedness is the irrelevance of its woundedness and that loves infinitely in love with it in his woundedness. That as long as we’re attributing authority to our woundedness, it’s the idolatry of conditioned states over the love that loves us so unexplainably in the midst of unresolved things like this. There’s another meaning to it too, I think, in it, to me. The wounded soul becomes rich in this sense, that the wounded soul has been wounded by an unconsummated longing.

That as this infinite love of God has made a move on us and touched us with the love that were powerless to consummate. In this sense, we’re wounded this way. This is why when we’re looking at St. John of the Cross where he’s praying to God out of this woundedness and he said, “It’s not fair that you do not carry off this heart that you have stolen for I live not where I live with thee.” But in the acceptance of the woundedness, the woundedness is healed and actually enters into us through that wound.

Of course, this is going to have illusions to the cross later and the mystery of the cross and death and love. I think it’s a very loaded, poetic thing on the two sides of this woundedness. St. John of the Cross says, “When we’re physically burned by physical fire, the cure is to put something cool on it. But when it comes to the fire of God’s love, the cure is more fire.” Here, the woundedness is to deepen the wound, because the deepening of the wound opens out upon the abyss of the love that’s taking us to itself in the woundedness, which is the gift of tears, with the gift of divinization through love.

Kirsten Oates: In this bound love, it’s an experience of oneness with God’s love for us beyond the senses. It’s happening outside of the senses.

Jim Finley: Yes, and also another big, big thing too, I can deepen in this bound love, in the midst of the deep acceptance of my yet unbound love. St. Paul, “I have a thorn in the flesh and I ask God to remove it.” And God says, “Leave it there, it’s your teacher.” Because all of us have something.

Thomas Byrne once said, “We’re all walking around with a secret little list in our heart. Once I learned to stop doing this and this and this, God, and I will really get serious.” He said, “The thing to realize with God, there’s no list.” He said, “Why do we have that list? We can’t bear being unconditionally loved. We can only bear being conditionally loved, because there’s no control in unconditional love.”

The idea is it’s true, I can’t help myself. I catch myself attributing authority to a shortcoming. You do it, I do it. We all do it. But what we’re realizing is that although we’re attributing authority to the shortcoming, trying to lean into this love where it’s irrelevant, the irrelevancy of our shortcoming has already begun to occur, because We’re being taken to

God in the midst of not being able to get past our shortcomings. That's a strange arrival place, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: The last little bit she says is, "I cannot imagine a person bound by the deepest stirrings of powerful love falling into serious sin, for the soul is bound and has to love. May God thus bind us all."

Jim Finley: I think what it means is, to me, what would serious sin mean? It isn't just that I would commit a sin, because I'm sinful, nor is it that I'd be incapable of a grievous sin, in a moment of... I mean, who knows, life's complicated. But I'd be incapable of committing a grievous sin, which grievously violates the mystery of love. I'd be incapable of doing it and not be devastated by my choice. I might do it, I might do it, but I'd be incapable in being devastated by the unloving thing that I did that love takes me to itself.

The devastating thing that I did and what my devastation. This is why sometimes, someone said about Thomas Merton, that he was a gentle man, because God was so gentle with him. Sometimes it's in the deep acceptance of wayward foibled waves, that the love gets deeper and deeper and deeper like this. This has a lot to do with deep therapy too. Also, recovery from addiction has a lot to do with this.

Kirsten Oates: In a way, serious sin is doing something that goes against this stream of love, perhaps doing it intentionally, but also not taking responsibility or not reconciling it or not.

Jim Finley: That's right. That's right. I think there's another, maybe we did the serious thing and maybe we didn't care. We're glad we did it. But then you have to look closer at what that's about. Was there a hurt that went so deep, like a traumatized internalized trauma that you acted out that.

They say, "Just beneath the anger is the pain, and just beneath the pain is the powerlessness." Sometimes when there's all this bravado of brushing forward and doing it, if you look really deeper, there's the pain inside, then there's the powerlessness to free oneself from the pain. The more one can unpack all of this, again, spiritual sobriety, and insight, and wisdom about the waves of the human heart. Another big example of all these mystics is the crucifixion of the good thief being crucified with Christ.

He said, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom, this day, you'll be with me in paradise." He didn't say to the thief, "It all depends. Let's have a look. I don't know. It is not a free ride." He doesn't even care. The prodigal son, the son coming back, he's making up a list to be admitted. Father. Doesn't even want to hear, puts a ring on his finger. St. Paul says, "If this is true, does that mean we would sin all the more?" Like a blank check on sin?

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jim Finley: He said, "God forbid, because if God loves us this way, it makes the mystery of sin all the more mysterious dark and regretful that we would live by love and not by that."

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, that's helpful.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, let's now turn to the next section that you read from the book and that started on page 225 in book six, well into section one, and we're going to start at the top of page 226.

Jim Finley: Right.

Kirsten Oates: "When a person purely for the love of God and not for earthly reward, instructs the ignorant, converts sinners, consoles the despondent and brings those in despair back to God, then he is God the Spirit with the Holy Spirit. That is a very blessed person who does everything humanly possible that is praiseworthy in God's eyes with that same love for God's praise and with the constant good intention of his whole heart, that person is one whole person with the Holy Trinity."

Jim Finley: Here, I think this is important because she's bearing witness to the importance and reality of the deeply good person who has committed himself, committed herself to this path of love and for the love of God to do for love's sake. What can I do to be helpful? How can I walk this walk and be someone whose presence in the world makes the world a better place to be? We should be very grateful for those people in our lives and grateful for those times in the ways in which we're able to be like that. She's acknowledging that and the importance of that. Okay, next paragraph though, but, go ahead.

Kirsten Oates: "But the dust of sin that settles upon us constantly, even against our will is quickly annihilated by the fire of love, when the glance of the eyes of our soul touches the godhead with the lonely sighing of sweet desire that no creature can resist. When she begins to rise, the dust of sin falls away from her and she becomes one God with God in such a way that whatever he wills, she wills as well, and they can be united in complete union, no other way."

Jim Finley: Okay, good. This is a lovely phrase about the dust of sin. It's a lovely phrase. I want to say master Dogan, he said this in the language of the Buddha. I'm going to put it in Christian language. He said, "The whole mystery of who we are in God's love is entirely beyond the world's dust." He says, "Therefore, how can there be a means to brush it clean what he uses any effort to dust it clean, because the whole mystery is already beyond all of that." I think this is a poetic way of saying what she's saying here.

Also notice, the sin settles upon us constantly, even against our will. 70 times seven times a day, the waywardness of fumbling around this and that goes on and on. You have your story. I have mine. Probably on our deathbed, still at it, maybe. Even against our will, but is quickly annihilated by the fire loss. It goes this way. If I'm walking around weighing my understanding of where I am in the presence of God based on my ability to measure up to who I sense I deep down really am and God wants me to be, I get discouraged.

I get really discouraged. If I attribute authority to the unresolved matters of my heart, of all the compromises. But what if instead, by the way, when I do that, there's a certain kind of hubris in it, is that I'm attributing power. Where my weaknesses are more powerful than the infinite love that loves me in my weaknesses. But if I renew my awareness with the God's grace of the infinite love that finitely loves me in my weaknesses, then the very moment of

the tripping place itself deeply accepted sin.

This settles on us constantly, even against our will is quickly annihilated by the fire of love. When the glance of the eyes of our soul touches the godhead with a lonely sighing of sweet desire. I look up and see God looking at me, and in our gaze, he's looking at me with a boundaryless love. In the gaze, when my gaze meets God's gaze, the imagined substance of my failing dissolves, and the failing then is almost then a deepening of the love.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, wow.

Jim Finley: This compunction, this deep sense of being constantly renewed in the love of the brokenness itself.

Kirsten Oates: Is this, Jim, what she was meaning by when the soul lowers her wings and the body lowers its wings?

Jim Finley: See, because look at what happens if I stumble and fall, let's say I really did in some way. I was indifferent or I mean whatever, but then I think I did fall, but by my own efforts, I want to open my wings and reinstate my ability. Then, I'm still caught in the confusion of not understanding the ways of love. But if instead of trying to open my wings, I renew my awareness of the irrelevancy of doing so, because it's finite. Likewise, my failings are finite compared to the infinite love, that infinite loves me in my failings and my virtues are finite compared to the infinite love that loves me and permeates and transcends my virtues.

She's trying to come to this mystical sense of an identity born of this infinite, incarnate infinity intimately realized. It doesn't mean that I don't act, but I act out of this, so that somehow when I do act, I'm incarnating this love in my action. Then when I speak, I am speaking, but God's speaking through me in love and God's using me to achieve her own purposes in the world by my sincere efforts to lean into the task at hand, kind of divested of monitoring where I'm at in it, but only how I can be ever more subtle in the presence of God channeling through my efforts. That's the subtlety of this, I think.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, and just like most of the mystics we've read, she talks about this sweet desire. Is that how we turn towards God? We kind of tap into our desire for love, to be loving, to experience love.

Jim Finley: Yeah. That's very good. I'll put it this way. We're looking at Julian too on this also, is that our desire for God is a finite echo of God's infinite desire for us, and so the sweet desire is sweet, because when I turn towards God, I see the sweetness of God's infinite desire for me. It's given to me as my feeble desire for this love, which shines through the feebleness of my love and consummate this union. That's my sense of it.

There's another way that I would put it too, I think. When we love somebody very, very, very much: lover, spouse, friend, brother, sister, uncle, community of people, whatever it is, define that person. Define that act, define that community, which when you give yourself over to it with your whole heart, it unravels your petty preoccupations with your self-absorbed self and brings you strangely home to yourself. That's love. That's what's so impossible, if we try to read her in linear consciousness as if she's defining something, she's not defining anything. She's poetically letting a light shine with words that embody what words can't say.

But insofar as our heart's been quickened by love, we know what she's talking about and that's how she's mentoring us. She's guiding us and habituating ourselves in this. Also, we can be reunited in complete union and in no other way, what's that mean? There is no other way, but for me to let you take me infinitely to yourself in the unending nature of my incompleteness, there's no other way. Once I surrender over and roll with that, it's holiness maybe, I don't know.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. It's so encouraging that our foibles and the things that we feel like we get wrong can be quickly annihilated by the fire of love if we lean into the desire to have done it better, to have been more loving, to be more attuned to the love that's always with us.

Jim Finley: Yeah. One mystic uses an image about our sins, and he says, "Our sins are like a drop of water falling on a fiery furnace, there's nothing to it." But I want to say something else that's important though. In relative consciousness, our actions count and they matter.

The legal order, the moral order, the attitudinal order, all that is so important. It's so important. The issue is when we attribute that to having the final say in what love's about. But likewise if we say because I'm love, so like Paul again, therefore, should we sin more, God forbid. It gives even more importance to being faithful and accountable and grounded in this paradoxical way of love.

Kirsten Oates: These messages are all so subtle. They're like right on the edge of things, aren't they?

Jim Finley: They are. Really, what she's saying is we're right on the edge of it. It's really the all-encompassing center of everything, and we're circling it, and she's drawing us in closer and closer to what's always there, but as we sit with her and let it sink in, well, she's teaching us trustworthy guidance. Turning to the Mystics will continue in a moment.

Kirsten Oates: Before we return to this episode of Turning to the Mystics, I just wanted to warn you that something a little unusual, and for me, pretty embarrassing, happens in this episode, but when Corey and I and Jim talked about it, we decided to leave it in because it's what really happened and we all hope that it puts a smile on your face. Okay, back to the episode. Jim, should we go to this next section on page 227, the second paragraph?

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: This seems to be part of the way she lives out, this idea in her own life, where she says, "If we want to overcome our shame with great honors, we must clothe ourselves with ourselves, so adorned, I seek Jesus, my sweet Lord, and I find him so quickly by no other means than by those things that are repugnant and burdensome. One should very eagerly step forward with the intense desire, ashamed of one's guilt, and with flowing love and humble fear, then the filth of sin disappears from the divine sight of our Lord. Then lovingly, he begins to cast his radiance toward the soul, and she begins to dissolve out of a deeply felt love. The soul loses all her guilt and all her sorrow, and he begins to teach her his complete will. Then she begins to taste his sweetness and he begins to greet her with his godhead..." I was doing so well.

Jim Finley: Come on, you can do it. Great. You can do this.

Kirsten Oates: Okay. Oh my gosh. Okay.

Jim Finley: You could do this.

Kirsten Oates: Okay.

Jim Finley: You take all this in. It's like a contemplative retreat at the nudist colony. You know what I mean? It's like you got to be able to take it all in and walk with it.

Kirsten Oates: That's right. Yeah.

Jim Finley: Take a deep breath. You can handle this.

Kirsten Oates: I can. I'm an adult woman.

Jim Finley: You are. Well, based on your laughter, you're getting there.

Kirsten Oates: Oh, my dear.

Jim Finley: Okay.

Kirsten Oates: Okay.

Jim Finley: By the way, I want to say something about it too.

Kirsten Oates: Okay.

Jim Finley: I do. It's all important. No, go ahead. We're into it. Come on now.

Kirsten Oates: Okay. You can still hear me, right? I'm going to have to look away.

Jim Finley: Okay. Okay. You know what we could do, without explaining it, I can read it. Okay?

Kirsten Oates: Well, if we don't say, but it'd be just weird if you come on and read that part.

Jim Finley: No. Oh, that's true. That's truly true.

Kirsten Oates: Okay, I can do this. Worst case, I can read it later when no one's here.

Jim Finley: Yeah, that's true. No, that's true.

Kirsten Oates: I can do it. "Then she begins to taste his sweetness and he begins to greet her with his godhead that the power of the holy..." I was going to say penetrates.

Jim Finley: You know what? Read this later. Listen, Kirsten. Kirsten read it later. Okay, Corey? Corey? Are you there?

Corey: Oh, I was muted. Sorry.

Jim Finley: Could she read it later?

Corey: Yeah, But I'm going to leave all this in. It'll be good.

Kirsten Oates: No.

Jim Finley: Yeah, let's keep going.

Corey: It'll be good. Come on, Kirsten.

Jim Finley: Yeah, in fact-

Kirsten Oates: Why don't you read it? Why don't you read it? Just to us.

Jim Finley: Let me do this.

Corey: Yeah. Jim, I want to hear what you were going to say earlier for the listeners.

Jim Finley: Okay, here we go.

Kirsten Oates: Okay.

Jim Finley: You know Kirsten, in the midst of your laughter, let me help you out. I want to help you out a little bit, okay? I want to walk through this. I also want to touch on what the laughter's about. First of all, I want to back up to the previous paragraph and she says what she does when she goes to pray, this is what she does, and she says that when she goes to pray, "I, the most wretched in person," meaning the wretchedness in my infidelities to love and so on as a love-filled person.

"Go to my prayer. I deck myself out according to my worthlessness. I dress myself in the fall puddle that I myself am. Then, I put on the shoes of precious time that I wasted day after day. Then, I gird myself with the suffering I have caused. Then, I put on the cloak of wickedness of which I am full. Then, I put on my head a crown of secret shameful acts that I've committed against God."

"After this, I take in my hand the mirror of true self-knowledge. Then, I look at myself in it and see who I really am. Alas, I see nothing but utter misery. I prefer to wear these clothes rather than to have my wish regarding all earthly possessions, and yet, they cause me such distress in my wretched fury that I would rather be clothed with hell and crowned with all the devils if this could happen through my no fault of mine. Alas, how very often do robbers of our own fickleness come and strip these clothes from us when we are pleased with ourselves, and in our guilt, declare ourselves innocent."

I want to talk about this for a minute. I want to apply it to, I alluded to this on the talk too about recovery from AA, the 12 steps. It's so significant, I think, that when a person is in the grips of their addiction and they're dying of their addiction, in order to be admitted to the recovery community, they have to admit that they're finished. That if this is up to them, it's over for them, because the alcoholic in them doesn't care about them, really, and they've tried and tried and they're being destroyed by the thing that gets them through their day.

They begin by admitting it. But if the only way out is resources within themselves, that would be despair. But if they keep trying to pretend that they can find a resource in themselves to get past it, the confusion continues. But what if there's a better way? What

if there's a way where a power greater than themselves can achieve, and then with their powerless to achieve, provided they hand themselves over to the care of the higher power. If you admit, you're admitted. If you don't admit, you're not admitted. Like this.

What we do is what do we admit? Like the alcoholic doing a fearless inventory. You run down the list of your litany of things like this. But here's the thing about it. When you admit all these things, a fearless inventory. A fearful inventory is one where you're attributing authority to the litany of failings. That's a fearful inventory. The fearless inventory is as the higher power listens, it doesn't care, because it's in love with you. It's in love with you. It's the idolatry of thinking. We are what's wrong with us over the love that takes us to itself in the midst of all the unfinished things that are still wrong with us.

This is the deep sobriety. This is the really deep sobriety. It looks like a litany of self-shaming things. It's actually the pretense for setting up the irrelevancy of attributing authority to any of this in the light of this love that takes us to itself. "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do," she's saying. Because when love touches suffering, the suffering turns love into mercy. The mercy takes us to itself as mercy. St. Julian of Norwich, "His meaning was love. This is mercy."

That's what she's saying. What happens, very often do robbers of our own fickleness come and strip these closer from us. We keep trying to pose and posture build up some basis for ourselves, and they rob us of the mystery of this infinite love that takes us to itself and our nothingness without God by attributing some kind of pretense or posture. We should be very careful of this fickleness. On what do we base our worth? Do we base it on the infinite love that loves us and shines out or not? I think that's the deep thing that she's getting at here.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, do you think this is a practice we should regularly engage in, the way she's gone through it here, to go through our days and focus on things that we might want to confess, or... Yeah?

Jim Finley: I do. In other words, it isn't as if we underline and say, "That's a beautiful thought. What's for lunch?" Because here's another way of looking at it. I think we should practice this all the time. First of all, with each other and with yourself and with God. I'll use an example we use. Imagine parents with a child. It's just learning how to talk. In its very first efforts to say words, the parents don't laugh at the child or make fun of it by its awkward way of trying to...

But the very littleness of the child and the sincerity of saying it accesses the parents and breaks their heart open with love. They get down and hold and give the child a hug. That's the way God sees us. Where am I in my life within myself, finding the ways that I've based my self-confidence on my achievements? Or do I attribute authority on my stumbling places to have the power that I am who I am? How can I ask God for the grace to establish myself in this infinite love that utterly transcends my foibles, and when I accept them as the opening to which God takes me to God?

Likewise, what is the attainments, by the way, my gifts that God gave me? But how are my very attainments transparent to the infinite attainment of God that's infinitely beyond my attainments? I'm grateful to let God use me through my attainments, and I'm grateful to

let... I think we should always be trying to practice this. Where am I in my marriage? Where two people, they settle for these rituals of pretending they do with each other and they're not happy with it.

Where am I in collusion with this half-hearted ritual of avoiding things that need to be looked at, need to be said? Or am I afraid to step forward and admit something and even admit that it's so hard to admit it? What's that say? I think we should do this. I really do. For example, we should step forward with desire and shame. Here's what's very interesting. All of a sudden, she moves into sexual imagery. I think Corey and I, and all the listeners, hope you're not ashamed that you couldn't stop laughing.

Kirsten Oates: No.

Jim Finley: Because that's Mechthild's point. That's what's so disarmingly delightful that you laughed, because we could all feel how you were trying to hold it together and you just couldn't do it. You couldn't do it. But I want to say what sexual imagery is about.

Kirsten Oates: Well, it'd be great if you read it for the listeners too.

Jim Finley: Okay, good. I'll read it. Then, I want to say what I think it's about.

Kirsten Oates: Are you going to read the whole paragraph or just that?

Jim Finley: I will. I'll just read this section. "If we want to overcome our shame with great honors, we must clothe ourselves with ourselves, with the true knowledge of what we're really like. So adorned, myself as I am, I seek Jesus my sweet Lord, and find him so quickly by no other means as by those things that are repugnant and burdensome to me." I want to use the example of you laughing. You could say it's burdensome.

You were trying so hard not to do it. With no other means, by those very things, but by the acceptance you couldn't stop laughing. She says, it's where the sweet Lord enters to accept it. Because it's humanity. Humanity. "One should eagerly step forward with intense desire, ashamed of one's guilt." I think ashamed of one's guilt is this, a shame that one's attributing. One feels guilty over the weakness, one couldn't get past and one's ashamed of it. "With flowing love and humble fear, then the filth of sin disappears from the divine side of the Lord. Then lovingly, he begins to cast his radiance toward the soul and she begins to dissolve out of deeply felt love."

Now, here's the imagery, and I want to use this in marital sexual intimacy and committed sexual intimacy. When two people are physically intimate and they deeply love each other, there's something so disarmingly intimate and vulnerable about it. It's like the yoga of the body. Being unveiled in ways that are beyond words, it's beyond explanations, it's beyond. It's just that it embodies itself forth with the sheer intimacy of the self-disclosures of the body and begins to dissolve out of a deeply felt love. The two people dissolve in love.

"The soul loses all her guilt and all her sorrow and begins, and he begins to teach her his complete will." The two people in this surrender learn together and taste together the sweetness of love and the intimacy of their mutual self-giving to each other in all of its details. It's utterly unique to them, whatever that is. "Then she begins to taste his sweetness

and he begins to greet her with his godhead.” In one sense, it’s intercourse. It means, with the godhead, to greet her.

“That the power of the Holy Trinity penetrates her fully, soul and her body.” Rollo May once said, “In sexual fantasies, the fantasy isn’t orgasm, it’s penetration. It’s oneness. To be in physically, it’s to be in and of one.” It’s the sacramentality of the body and the act that God creates and symbolizes as this. She receives true wisdom. The two people learn together in marriage what love’s all about in unexplainable ways. Then they hope to carry that closeness throughout the day and sensitivities to how they touch each other, look at each other, care about each other.

It’s woven into the rhythms of everything they do with each other. Here, he’s saying that there’s a kind of a union of love with the infinite love of God and our body and our soul, that it takes on a sense of rapture or it takes on a sense of surrendered oneness. Our whole being is caught up in it, wisdom. Then, God begins to caress her and she becomes weak. God’s caressing her in this intimate moment, and in God caressing her, her knees buckle. She melts and she becomes weak with love. She so begins to drink it all in that God becomes, he becomes lovesick for her.

It’s her very melting in the love that melts God’s love for her, and he becomes lovesick for her. This is where she’s saying the other passage, you know, freely chose to be so lovesick. “God so revealed to me that God is so freely chosen to be so infinitely in love with me. God honestly doesn’t know if God could ever handle being God without me.” She said, “Take me home with you. I’ll be your physician forever.” Under sexual imagery is really the mystical dimensions of the realities of human sexuality. Sincerely experiences as sacrament of this, but she’s saying that’s a sacrament of this love that’s now understood interiorly within our soul.

Notice you can’t make love in a distant neat way. You can’t make love on the other side of the room and some neat... There has to be a mutual falling into it together. She said, “God’s like that with prayer.” It’s like this. She says, “Because he becomes so lovesick, then he begins to limit the intensity because he knows her limits better than she herself.” He knows you can’t stand it. It’s too much. You have all eternity to do this. He knows you’re just melting away. On purpose, God backs off on the intensity, because you have to tie your shoes and go to work.

I mean, you have to live your life. It’s on purpose God distances, the intensity of the union, but by the way, it’s always there, breath unto breath. It’s always there. What we’re talking about are gradations of the intensity we experience of oneness. It’s always there. Then, she begins longing to show him great faithfulness. Then, he begins to give her full knowledge. This is the true gnosis, the deep knowledge of the substance of the infinite mystery of love that permeates our powerlessness. It’s an amazing passage. Really, it is.

Kirsten Oates: Jim, would this be describing in metaphor what happens with the bound love? What happens in the soul, kind of that surrendering over and that meeting place and that?

Jim Finley: Yeah, here’s my understanding of it, I think so. Let’s say when we hear this talk, we can all look back at moments in our life where we tasted something of this in our utterly unique way or something like that. Let’s say then we also trust our intuition that in that moment we

tasted something of which she speaks. We know that in that moment it isn't as if something more was given to us, but a curtain open and the infinite love, that's the true nature of every moment, including this one was revealed.

That's how I think we walk with this. That's what I mean by having faith in the revelatory nature in our moments of awakening and they reveal and lay bare the depths. It's always there in every moment, but unless there's a daily rendezvous in prayer or daily rendezvous and constantly renewing vulnerability and truthfulness in our relationships, it can slip away. We're always keeping the edges of the fidelity wide open to keep it stabilized and so we can... Like that. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. Should we go onto the last section?

Jim Finley: Yes, let's do.

Kirsten Oates: "Now, dear fellow. There are still two more things that you must guard against with holy zeal for they have never born fruit. The first is that a man or woman wants to accomplish much in pursuing great deeds and fine conduct in order to achieve a high church office. Such an attitude vexes my soul. When such people have then achieved power, their baseness becomes so many faceted that no one who voted for them with great enthusiasm is happy with them."

"They then become misguided by honors and their false virtues turn into vices. The second is when a person is chosen rightfully with no meddling on his part, and then changes so completely that he never feels the urge to leave this office. This is a sign of many failings, for even if he is irreproachable in it, he should still be fearful and humble. A sincere woman and a good man who after my death would have liked to talk with me but cannot, should read this little book."

Jim Finley: Yeah, I think this is so important that she ended this way, because it reveals that she didn't live in this love. It's some ethereal, celestial place, dualistically, other than the concreteness of her own lived responsibilities. In other passages in the book, which we didn't read, where they chose her as a beginning to lead the group, the community. She talks about difficulties with personalities in the group. All this is lived out in the realities, the push and the pull of everyday life.

Here, although she's looking specifically at the church, you can see this is also true of politics, of society and so on, but specifically of the church where someone is chosen for a leadership position in the church because they exemplified this holiness or this thing. Then over time, they got seduced by empire, or by power, or by, and they drifted far from it like this. It's the brokenness of spiritual leadership in the church. Then, how to say that and be honest with that and so forth.

Likewise, there's someone who comes in and has chosen in leadership in the church. They come in and they stay, but they stay long past their ability to effectively be able to perform their duties. They won't leave. They don't leave. She's just pointing out that all this happens in the ongoing endless brokenness of the human condition. These two things aren't dualistically other than each other, they're woven together like this, like the day by day.

Kirsten Oates: I mean she has this amazing paragraph on this metaphorical love connection. Then the next

paragraph is on these very practical, that's all woven together with her. It's beautiful that way.

Jim Finley: Here's what I think too, is that I think on one level, let's say in our quieter moments, we can be in the love place and then we go out and face the stress of the day and we get caught up in people and politics and so on. We're actually getting caught up in it. We do get caught up in it. We do our best. But then when we come back the next day when we're in our quiet place, we can get re-grounded in the quiet place of love. Look how we did yesterday, like an examination of conscience.

As for the grace that when we head out to face it one more time, we can be a little more grounded in the middle of it, not lose our balance so much and not become part of the problem like this and do what's asked of us to do that. I think that's true. Also, to know this, I mean by the bittersweet alchemy, that somehow there's something holy about that. There's something holy about the interplay of the concreteness of the real world ribbon through this love and this love through the real world. She's so real like this.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, beautiful. I guess because knowing she's leaving this book behind, because she encourages people who would want to talk to her to read the book. She's trying to offer some guidance for people who would come to her.

Jim Finley: Yeah. By the way, it helps to understand. Now, notice how she started the book. She starts out really, God's the one who's writing it like she's taking down. Then she says, "I suggest that you read it nine times."

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: Remember that?

Kirsten Oates: Yes.

Jim Finley: Now, you can see why.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, yeah.

Jim Finley: Because there's no end to it. It goes round and round. You really could spend the rest of your life sitting and walking with it. It goes deeper, deeper, deeper. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Well, should we move to the final section?

Jim Finley: Yes.

Kirsten Oates: You read from the last couple of pages of book seven, and so starting on 335, and this is a conversation between the soul and the body, to begin.

Jim Finley: Yes. Yes.

Kirsten Oates: The soul says, "Dearest prison in which I have been bound, I thank you especially for being obedient to me. Though I was often unhappy because of you, you nevertheless came to my aid. On the last day, all your troubles will be taken from you. Then, we shall no longer complain. Then, everything that God has done with us will suit us just fine."

“If you will now only stand fast and keep hold of sweet hope. Obedience is a holy bond. It binds the soul to God and the body to Jesus and the five senses to the Holy Spirit. The longer it binds, the more the soul loves, the less the body preserves itself, the fairer its works shine before God and before people of goodwill.”

Jim Finley: Yeah. When I shared the talk on this, toward the end of her life, she lived in the Cistercian convent, of Cistercian nuns. She became completely physically incapacitated and she went blind and she couldn't feed herself, couldn't clothe herself. She was completely dependent on the nuns. This whole experiential sense of God's love completely went away.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, that's amazing.

Jim Finley: It's so stunning. The last two books, she dictated them because she couldn't write, she couldn't write. She comes full circle and just like she speaks to the epitome of the raptures of love, it comes full circle, it meets the epitome of suffering and loss. The two points of the circle touch each other.

She bears, it's kind of stunning, really. It's so moving this way. She finds it. She said, “If God wants me to be a blind, helpless woman, who can't experience God, so be it.” There, she's joining the poverty of the whole world, like the holiness of being bereft of a sense of that-

Kirsten Oates: I think it gives a lot of credibility to her teaching on bound love.

Jim Finley: It does. It does.

Kirsten Oates: That it's beyond the senses, because she's living connected to the bound love, even though she's not experiencing it in her senses.

Jim Finley: Yeah, that's very good. I think it's really true, because we might put it this way, she might say that God is the infinity of the mystery of the oneness of her inability to experience God. God's the infinity of her inability. God's the infinity of the mystery of her blindness, because even though she can't physically see, she can clearly see in a deeper way. Years ago, I was leading a retreat. This was back before the internet and all this stuff.

They had a little gathering at the beginning of the weekend retreat. I was sitting in the library of the retreat house. It was a little social. I looked down and here it was the big book of AA in braille. I thought, “What would that be to be a blind alcoholic?” Some people can see so deeply, because they can't physically see. Some people have 20/20 vision, but they don't see it so well. You can see, although she was blind, how deeply she could see. Although she was incapacitated, the depth of power she holds.

I also think it helps understand our own aging process and the weakness of our own death and the passing away of things. Learn to trust that and flow with that and be open to that because it's all woven into the mystery. Because we believe in faith, death is the gate of heaven. We believe in faith that we're eternal like that. Anyway, just-

Kirsten Oates: It's so stunning the way she has her own soul speak this way and to the body and says, “Because the we,” the soul and the body, it's the hope you've said so many times to how you die alone. There's the hope that our own souls will be there to comfort us on the way

through.

Jim Finley: You know what I like about it too, notice how we have an ongoing interesting relationship with our body. Sometimes, the relationship is complicated. I don't want to bring up your laughter again. It can be embarrassing. Like the body takes over in different ways.

Kirsten Oates: Please stop bringing it up.

Jim Finley: I won't, but I wanted to. But the thing is too, sometimes the relationship is delightful. Sometimes It's amazing, sometimes it's... Part of the spirituality is somehow God's relationship with us is embodied in the subtleties of the way we relate to our body, which is the embodiment, the deep yoga of the holiness of the body. But I so love Mechthild, really, she's just so encouraging and deep and beautiful.

Kirsten Oates: Especially the way she lived it out in her life as a leader of the community, then as someone who lost touch with God's presence in her senses, but maintained that connection in her soul and lived that way.

Jim Finley: I think there's another lesson here about these mystics too. You look at all the mystics, it's really played out in our life, how we're living our life and God's ribbon through our life and through our death. That's why it's always, when we finish our quiet time in prayer, we ask God for the grace not to break the thread of that, because the unfolding of the day is the incarnate presence of God's oneness with us. We learned to become ever clearer about that and believe in it. Yeah. Anyway.

Kirsten Oates: Lovely. Well, I'm taking away, there's a couple of one-liners from this one. I love this one that, "We come to God, we clothe ourselves with ourselves." I just love that. There's something so freeing about that, but also challenging, challenging and freeing. Yeah. Beautiful. Then I also love the line, "May God thus bind us all."

Jim Finley: As a matter of fact, when I read the mystics, you could go through Mechthild and if you had colored markers and in red underline the one-liners that you just think are stunning. Then in yellow, underline the words that shed light on your own heart. Then, another color where the question lies. Because if you would line up all those one-liners, like a mantra and say them out like a litany, like a way to pray. The way these mystics talk is so amazing, really. It's so poetic.

Kirsten Oates: It just cuts through so much, doesn't it?

Jim Finley: It does.

Kirsten Oates: It hits you in those details. Yeah.

Jim Finley: It does. It cuts your explanations through definitions. It goes right just like that. It's just stunning. Great.

Kirsten Oates: Beautiful. Jim, we're coming to the end of the sessions you've been offering. We're going to do a coaching session next time, but I just want to thank you for all you've offered from Mechthild and the beautiful passages you chose, and it's just been a real gift. Thank you for

today.

Jim Finley: No, you're very welcome, and I'm grateful for the gift to be able to share this with you and with all the listeners. It's been a gift to me also.

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 at cac.org/voicemails. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.