



# EVERYTHING BELONGS

What Do We Mean by “Mysticism”?  
with Mirabai Starr

Mike Petrow: Hey everyone. Welcome back to another season of Everything Belongs, a podcast where we discuss how to live the teachings of Richard Rohr forward. We're so excited, this season we're going to be talking about Richard's classic book, Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis Of Assisi. My name is Mike Petrow. I'm joined in the background by our amazing producer, Corey Wayne, and of course, by my personal hero and favorite co-host, Paul Swanson. Paul, how are you doing on this fine day?

Paul Swanson: I'm doing well. It's a joy to be back recording with you and Corey and Everything Belongs, and this is such a great book. I loved what Richard lays out here in Eager to Love and grounds us in what's formed him and this opportunity for us to have these expansive conversations at Richard's hermitage, with him and Opie, of course, but also with other kind of illuminative minds who have thought about this and chewed on it and wrestled with it and lived it out in their own way. So I'm thrilled to be back here doing this podcast. And how are you feeling now that we're done with season one, we saw the ducks reach the waters, how do you feel being back with this season?

Mike Petrow: This podcast is so much fun and for anyone who's tuning in for the first time, the way this works is we take one of Richard's books. Each episode we discuss a chapter. We get a chance to hang out with Richard and chat with him a little bit about that chapter. And then we hang out with one of our favorite conversation partners who we think has a very particular insight into what makes that chapter so great. We get to learn from some of our greatest teachers and our best friends and our heroes. Paul, what more could I say? It's a gift and it's a gift to hang out with you. It's a gift to hang out with Richard.

This book especially, Eager to Love is being republished this year. So if you don't have a copy, it's a great time to grab one. We are knocking at the door of Francis of Assisi's feast day on October 4th. And I just feel like Eager to Love has the full DNA of Richard's teaching in it. I think if you ever want to pick up one book to get a sense of what Richard Rohr is really about, it's probably this one. And you don't have to read the book to listen to the podcast, that's for sure. But what a great series of conversations this is going to be.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, it just reverberates with the incarnational mysticism of the Franciscan Way, and you're going to dive into all these terms and some of the characters that helped really preauthorized Franciscanism with a deep seeping in how Richard was formed in this way of being in the world and how it's impacted not only us, but millions around the world. And we're excited to go on this journey with you. Whether you pick up the book Eager to Love or you just tune into the podcast, thanks for being here. And with that, we're going to head over to Richard's hermitage to connect with him and Opie, of course, about this first chapter.

Mike Petrow: All right, Paul, let's do it. From the Center for Action and Contemplation, I'm Mike Petrow.

Paul Swanson: I'm Paul Swanson.

Mike Petrow: And this is Everything Belongs.

Paul Swanson: Richard, thanks for inviting us back into your house.

Richard Rohr: You're most welcome.

Paul Swanson: And we're eager to talk about *Eager to Love*, your book on Franciscanism and all that entails and your journey within it. And it only seems appropriate since our last conversation on this podcast, we were interrupted by ducks. Do you have any updates on how the little ones are doing and the mother duck?

Richard Rohr: The second brood disappeared from their nest on a weekend that I was gone, so I didn't get to see them march to the hesychia, but I assume they did because the nest was empty and mama duck had led them. It was a beautiful site on the first batch, right here at my door. I hope they come back next year. It really was a very magical

Mike Petrow: It really was a very magical experience.

Richard Rohr: It was wonderful. You were here.

Mike Petrow: Ridiculously. Beautiful. Well, I'm so excited to be with you all to talk about *Eager to Love*. It's so great to invite our listeners to read along or just listen along. This is one of my all time favorite of your books, and so I can't wait to do this journey. Yeah, it's so great.

Richard Rohr: Oh, thank you.

Mike Petrow: So great. I feel like it really gets to the essence of a lot of the cores of your teaching.

Richard Rohr: Well, that makes me happy if that's true, that I got that down somewhere and Franciscanism has been at the heart of my worldview, as you know.

Paul Swanson: Well, and you address it too. Sometimes Francis could come across flat because he's so sanctified that the texture, the dirt, the way of life can get flattened along the way. But as a way to begin, we just want to ask you a question first because we know how Saint Francis of nothing took such great joy in the goodness and love of God. So in your own life story, Richard, when did you first experience the goodness and the love of God?

Richard Rohr: Wow. Boy, you bring it home, don't you? I just assumed it to be true that I had met starting with my parents in their but limited but real ways, the little Kansas farm Catholic culture I grew up in, a lot of simply loving people, not in any fancy ways. And I assume, well, God couldn't be better than that. That's what God must be like. So I assumed a loving God. It didn't need to be proven to me. And I was almost disappointed as I began to study moral theology and the way we interpreted the scriptures to see how judicial the gospel became, at least in Catholic interpretation. It wasn't about love, it was about law, and I don't think that's an exaggeration.

Paul Swanson: Right, right.

Mike Petrow: I've so appreciated how in your teaching, while you give us good theology, you always bring us back to experience. I'm curious, did you have any mystical experiences or experiences of the goodness of the divine when you were a child?

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Mike Petrow: Would you be willing to share about any of them with us?

Richard Rohr: The one came back to me just about 10 years ago when I returned to my cousin's farm away in flat, flat western Kansas where we used to stay in the summer with our cousins, and I found a little patch of very rich green grass right next to a chokecherry bush. Do you have chokecherries in Minnesota?

Paul Swanson: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: Yeah. And it was hidden from the house and the walkway and I went out there and laid at night and looked up at the stars and felt this is it. I wasn't educated yet. It wasn't a highly philosophical way of thinking. It was just, I knew it was good and I knew it was God and I knew it was for me. I'm only giving it those words now, but I went back and found that little spot. The chokecherry bush is still there and a little different kind of grass, whatever it is, it's still there. I almost wept.

Mike Petrow: It's so beautiful, and when I think of beauty, I also think of, if I remember correctly, you've shared with us about your first encounter with the Franciscans, which I think was an experience of beauty, wasn't it? How did you first encounter the Franciscan order as a child?

Richard Rohr: When I was in the eighth grade, 14, they came in their brown robes to give what was called a parish mission where they would take over the parish church for a week, do all the preaching and all the teaching every night, a major sermon. It was our version of an altar call. We didn't have anything like an altar call, but we just listened to priests preach. Well, these two guys were grand old men, really, Chris Schneider and Noel Williams, still remember their name.

Paul Swanson: Wow.

Mike Petrow: Wow.

Richard Rohr: And they came into our eighth grade classroom in their lovely brown robes and I was probably all a twitter. Look at that. There are such people and I must have expressed interest to one of them because they gave me a little booklet with the address in Cincinnati and I wrote to them and never regretted that decision, even though my reasons for staying changed, I would say, every two years.

Paul Swanson: Has that continued to today?

Richard Rohr: Yes. I have no resentments, but the order as order is good men, but more Roman than Catholic, more American than universal. We've just accepted the local culture that we were a part of. We still have statues of Saint Francis and Clare and consider them our symbolic leaders, but there wouldn't be much quoting of them really, to be honest.

Mike Petrow: It's going to be good to quote them a bit when we get into our upcoming conversations.

Richard Rohr: Well, Francis, there's quotes, but it's also the official reading at the beginning of a chapter or something like that, not at the dinner table.

Mike Petrow: I love that idea. I love thinking of young Richard being stirred by these elders in their brown robes in the sense of calling that elicited-

Richard Rohr: Everything is symbolic when you're at 14. The robes and the sandals, they were from another planet. Yeah, another religious planet.

Paul Swanson: And I imagine giving you something from themselves to you would have an impact of the reception of that little book.

Richard Rohr: Probably.

Paul Swanson: This chapter, chapter one, what do we mean by mysticism? You quote the Franciscan motto of my God and all things. Now taking that motto in relationship to mysticism, how does that communicate for you, Francis's sense of the mystical, my God in all things?

Richard Rohr: Francis's spirituality was not exclusive. It was not separating yourself from the impure, the unworthy, the sinners. He moved down to the leper colony. That's his conversion. He says that in his testament. When he got off his horse, what wonderful symbolism, and kissed a leper. It was that moment that my sadness turned to joy and I knew what the gospel was. That's almost a quote. You see how unchurchy it is. It's not while kneeling in the church. Now, there is the praying before the cross of San Damiano, but that's right afterwards. Remember the movie Brother Son, Sister Moon? He goes running from, I think... Well, I better not say because I'm not sure. I wanted to say from kissing of the leper to the praying before the cross. I'm not sure if they're aligned or if they're even shown in the movie.

Mike Petrow: I've never seen that movie. We should watch it.

Paul Swanson: We should watch it.

Richard Rohr: Well, Michael, why don't we buy it at the CAC and show it around October 4th?

Paul Swanson: That'd be great. The soundtrack is amazing.

Richard Rohr: You wouldn't be disappointed.

Mike Petrow: All right. I'm going to watch it and listeners are here at the moment where I've seen it and we bring it into the conversation.

Richard Rohr: That's great. You'll love it. Clare is a little movie star and he's a handsome Englishman.

Mike Petrow: Well, I love this idea of incarnational mysticism and I'm always, we'll come back to this again and again, I suspect, so moved by this image of Francis kissing the leper and the immersion in life. You know I got to bring it back to Origen. Origen has this comment, he says, "To love God and to love good things are one and the same," which feels Franciscan to me, doesn't it?

Richard Rohr: It sure does. To love God and to love good things. Why didn't I discover Origen early? Good for you. Thank you.

Mike Petrow: How do you think we live that? And I love when you talk about, again, incarnational mysticism. How can we bring that love of God and good things to three-dimensional reality in our lives, and even for our listeners is they're going to take a journey through this book with us?

Richard Rohr: I think it was very intentional, the title I chose for the book *Eager to Love*, because I felt, and forgive me God if I'm wrong, but most attempts at church reform were eager to be right, eager to judge, eager to win.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Richard Rohr: There was none of that in Francis, and people don't realize how revolutionary that is. He was just, as was Clare, eager to love, to love everything, which became our motto, by God and everything.

Mike Petrow: Well, and I so appreciate that because if we riff on that to love God and to love good things as one and the same, and then we remember that we're given a creation story where God says over and over again, "It is good, it is good, it is good," it invites us to see all things as good.

Richard Rohr: Excellent. Thank you. Excellent. How did we run over those it is good and it was very good repeated six, seven times?

Mike Petrow: Interesting. And in recognizing that it is good, that doesn't mean that there's not injustice and not difficulty. Richard, you have this great quote in the book in this chapter, "Franciscan mysticism is poised and prepared to lead people not just to inner experience, but to the possibility of daily and regular experience in the depth and beauty of the ordinary," God, I love that, "Especially because it incorporates the seeming negative and moves our life to its hard edges, thus making things like failure, tragedy and suffering the quickest doorway to encountering God." And first of all, that reminds me a lot of everything we talked about last season as we explored falling upward. That's really the falling upward journey, isn't it? To see the divine moving even in failure, tragedy and suffering. I'm curious, Richard, how would you invite our listeners to really create more space in their life for that experience and view as we're going to go through *Eager to Love* over the next few weeks?

Richard Rohr: Once you recognize that the spiritual journey is not a set of purity codes, ways to separate yourself from the impure, the unworthy, that major decision early on, and it largely depends on who taught you, what makes you holy. Jesus showed no interest in dietary laws or purity codes of don't touch this, don't go there. He wasn't even shocked when David told his soldiers to eat the holy bread in the temple. That's just unthinkable.

But you could tell in Francis, as in Jesus, there's no strong distinction between the pure and the impure. It's all pure for those who know how to see. Once you get that first fork in the road correctly walked, then the only thing you could do if you're not eliminating the impure and the unworthy and the sinful and the malodorous and the whatever other negative term, when that isn't what is to be avoided, you know what emerges is the embrace of it, the positive embrace of it. Even in Francis and Clare, you find the preference, preference for it, which becomes solidarity with sin, with lepers in his case, with those at the bottom, the *minores* as the MNR initials means, not the *maiores*.

Paul Swanson: So the invitation to the primacy of love is the first step towards looking out.

Richard Rohr: Yes.

Paul Swanson: Not seeing pure or impure, but beginning with love as a starting place.

Richard Rohr: And non-judgmental love. Let me give it if this is adding too much, a sociopolitical interpretation. In my opinion, now there was Jan Hus in the Czech Republic, there was Waldo and the Waldensians in Italy, there were the poor men of lions in France who were in many ways similar to Francis, but most of the major reformers came from the clergy and tried to prove that their interpretation of the clergy was right. Do you know the word priest wasn't used? Did Origen use the word priest?

Mike Petrow: I'd have to go back and look.

Richard Rohr: Check it out. I bet he doesn't. It's not until the third century after 313, as priest is an Old Testament word. I think you Protestants did it much better when you went back to the word ministers. Priest had all this cultic authority, sacral symbolism. And of course, you know what I say about 313, once we identified with empire and became the official religion of the empire, both in the west in Rome with Constantine in the east with Justinian and Constantine too. Well, let's jump forward to France lasting till the French Revolution. We have the Estates General in France, four estates. What's the first estate? You guessed, the clergy. The clergy, the most privileged group in the government. How can you expect reform to come from such a group? The second, the nobility. Together, the clergy and the nobility only created 3% of the French Empire. I just read this recent, the whole rest was the third estate.

Mike Petrow: It's interesting to me, and I am remembering Origen was not a priest for most of his career, and then later was ordained a priest and it created all manner of drama, but the tension of how even the church can be used to put power in the hands of the few and power in the hands of empire. I can't wait to get more into Francis's story in later episodes and see how Francis somehow managed to stay in the church but also reform it in a completely different way.

Richard Rohr: To not elicit contrarian energy in himself, the friars, the Poor Clares, the Third Order as we called it later. We were not a contrarian, no offense please, protesting movement, even though we were. That's his genius.

Paul Swanson: Yeah, this is an exciting start, I think, for our conversation on Eager to Love. Thank you, Richard, so much for having this conversation.

Richard Rohr: Oh, good. You get the best out of me. Thank you.

Mike Petrow: And may it be so for all of us. May we be agents of transformation in the places we find ourselves. Everything Belongs will continue in a moment.

Welcome back everybody. Today we're going to be talking about chapter one. What do we mean by mysticism? And who better to talk to about what we mean by mysticism than our precious friend, Mirabai Starr. Mirabai Starr is an award-winning author, internationally

acclaimed speaker and a leading teacher of interspiritual dialogue. In 2020, she was honored on the Watkins' list of 100 most spiritually influential living people. Drawing from 20 years of teaching philosophy and world religions at the University of New Mexico-Taos, Mirabai now travels the world, sharing her wisdom on contemplative living, writing as a spiritual practice and the transformational power of grief and loss. She's authored over a dozen books, including her most recent release, *Ordinary Mysticism: Your Life as Sacred Ground*. And if I can say this, Mirabai is a precious friend and a mentor and a friend of Father Richard and the CAC and, I hope, all of you.

Oh my gosh, Mirabai, it is so good to have you here. You are such a dear friend to our listeners, to Father Richard, to the Center for Action and Contemplation and to me. You're the friend that first suggested that I move to New Mexico. I don't know how much more I can say, my precious teacher. Goodness gracious. Welcome to the Everything Belongs podcast.

Mirabai Starr: Thank you, Mike. It has been a joy to walk alongside you over these last few years.

Mike Petrow: Gosh, what a gift. So this season we are talking about Richard's book, *Eager to Love* "The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi. And this week we're talking about chapter one, what do we mean by mysticism? And I thought it might be fun if first I started with a reading from Richard, and then I'll ask you from a reading from your latest book.

Mirabai Starr: Yes, let's do that.

Mike Petrow: All right, excellent. So Richard says this, "The most unfortunate thing about the concept of mysticism is that the word itself has become mystified and relegated to a misty and distant realm that implies it is only available to a very few. For me, the word simply means experiential knowledge of spiritual things, as opposed to book knowledge, secondhand knowledge, or even church knowledge. Most of organized religion, without meaning to, has actually discouraged us from taking the mystical path by telling us almost exclusively to trust outer authority, scripture, tradition, or various kinds of experts, what I like to call containers, instead of telling us the value and importance of inner experience itself, which is the content. In fact, most of us were strongly warned against ever trusting ourselves." I love that passage from Richard, and it reminds me quite a bit of how you talk about mysticism, especially in your newest book, *Ordinary Mysticism: Your Life as Sacred Ground*. And, in fact, as a means of jumping in, could I ask you to read us a section from the opening of your book starting right at the top?

Mirabai Starr: I'd love to, and this is not a coincidence by the way. We'll talk about that. Richard has had a huge influence on me.

A mystic is someone who skips over the intermediaries, ordained clergy, prescribed prayers, rigid belief systems, and goes straight to God, meaning someone who experiences the divine as an intimate encounter rather than an article of faith. A mystical experience may or may not be connected to established spiritual traditions, theological structures or faith communities. Mysticism is not about concepts, it's about communion with ultimate reality. And ultimate reality is not some faraway prize we claim when we have proved ourselves worthy to perceive it. Ultimate reality blooms at the heart of regular life. It shines through



the cracks of our daily struggles and sings from the core of our deepest desires. A mystic knows beyond ideas, feels deeper than emotions, is fundamentally changed by that which is unchanging. Mysticism is a way of seeing beyond the turmoil, the rights and wrongs, the good guys and villains to the radiant heart of things.

Mike Petrow: Oh my gosh, seeing to the radiant heart of things. I love that so much. It reminds me of one of Richard's favorite definitions of contemplation, which is a long loving look at the real.

Mirabai Starr: Yes.

Mike Petrow: Goodness gracious, this idea of saying to the radiant heart of things. I can't wait to get into this with you, but before we jump in, let me just back up for a second. I can't wait to see you next week up in Taos for the launch of this newest book of yours. Would you mind telling us how did this new book come to be?

Mirabai Starr: So I would say there are two different streams, let's call them, that fed into the genesis of this book. One was a natural way that my soul has been unfolding in the last few years, wherein my attachment, certainly my connection, but my attachment, I'll even call it, to certain religious forms. And by the way, for those of you who are not familiar with my work, I actually do follow numerous spiritual paths. Hinduism, at least nominally, Buddhism much more in my meditation practice, Sufism, which is the mystical expression, let's say heart of Islam and my ancestral Jewish tradition in its most progressive form, I would say, and definitely the Christian mystical tradition. So all of these paths co-mingle in my soul. But I've been developing an allergy, almost, to religiosity.

And so certain kinds of ways of framing things, God language, actually has been making me kind of recoil a bit, and I've looked at that with interest and curiosity like, "What is going on here?" These traditions are so deep in my heart and so meaningful to me, but they're starting to really turn me off. So I'm someone who's learned to trust when things like that arise, to investigate them with a light touch, just be really genuinely curious and see what's happening. But as I begin to pull on those threads, what I'm finding is a lot has unraveled and what's left is luminous. I've not thrown out the treasures of these traditions with the dirty water of what doesn't resonate for me anymore, but a lot of it has been falling away.

And as a writer and as a public thinker, I expose all of that in writing. And so that's why nobody please take anything that I have in print that seriously because it's likely to change by the next book, but at least I'm open about it. So that was one stream, was my own natural deconstruction process with regard to the formality of religion. The other one is that Anne Lamott, the wonderful contemporary Christian-esque writer. It's hard to define Anne Lamott because she's in a category unto herself. Herself, she's also quite literary.

Mike Petrow: Yeah, amazing, amazing.

Mirabai Starr: Yeah. So Anne is a friend of mine and a mentor I would say. And although in this book I take the whole idea of mentor-protégé relationships also to task, I'm deconstructing those as well while I'm at it. But Anne said to me, "Look, I have a book idea for you." And where that came from is that I interviewed her for a summit on the mystics for the Shift Network where I was interviewing a lot of my favorite mystical friends, including Jim Finley. And she prepared this beautiful talk, really, for our conversation, for her session. And she called it

Mysticism 101. And it was all about how to be a mystic in this world, how to take it down from the elevated perch where we often foist our mystics and our mystical concepts.

And how do you actually just cultivate that long-loving gaze? How do you frame your life through the lens of love? And so when she gave me that... People do that with me. I don't know what it is about me, but people just love to tell me their ideas of the books they think I should write. But when Anne Lamott said that, I perked up and it just coincided with what was naturally happening, which isn't that religions are bad and wrong, it's that life itself is sacred, lo and behold. And Father Richard has also taught me that, even in his guise as a Franciscan clergy person.

Mike Petrow: I love that. And we're going to get into that. I'm super excited about it. So short answer, what is mysticism to you? I hear these beautiful definitions. I feel like every time we talk I could write down three more wonderful definitions of what the mystical is and how we encounter it. But what is mysticism to you today?

Mirabai Starr: For me now, a mystical experience, and they brim from all kinds of moments in any given day, by the way, this is not a rarefied specialized meritocracy-based reality, a mystical experience is one in which I experience the sacred directly. It's not about some belief that I'm espousing or buying into. It's not even necessarily about a practice that I'm engaged in, although it can be. There are some practices that are pretty reliable for opening the heart, which is the next part for me of a mystical experience. It's an experience of the heart opening. And out of that open heart flows the parts of us that often are in the way of a direct experience of the divine and into that open heart flows that grace, that sacred substance, that mercifully helps me forget for a moment that I am separate.

Mike Petrow: Oh, God helps me forget for a moment that I am separate. That's amazing. I love that. I love and have all the years that we've been friends, the years before that that I read your books, I love how you approach mysticism and how you give it life beyond the boundaries of institutions and intellectualizations. It's mysticism beyond creed, dogma, organization or institution. And it's anchored in experience. And I so love that. For me, the image I have is letting a bird out of a cage. I can't help but think about the hummingbirds that are so prevalent and so sacred here in New Mexico and show up on my hikes as I'm sure they show up on yours. And I know they're traditionally associated with the spirit and they don't do well in captivity. You really can't cage them. I think a lot of us, without realizing it, and I hear this in what you're saying, we've caged our capacity for mystical encounter. How do you think we break the bars open and open ourselves and open our hearts back up to this mystical experience that you're describing?

Mirabai Starr: Well, for me, it's a combination of critical thinking and dropping down into my heart and disarming my heart. And it's both. One of the things I've learned maybe as a female person in this world, and I think people of all genders have access to exactly what I'm talking about, is that seemingly contradictory propositions can not only both be true, but just are and must be. And that's called a paradox, and that's what characterizes the mystical life. So it's not all about only the heart. It's like in Buddhism they talk about the two wings of wisdom and loving kindness or compassion. And it's in Jewish mysticism too, hesed and gevurah. It's in every wisdom tradition, we see that we need both a loving heart, a softening, a yielding, a tender heart, and we also need a fierce discernment and a willingness to rigorously engage

with reality and wrestle out the truth.

And so for me, the mystical path is not fluffy. And when I talk about love, it's not only a sentimental love, although there's definitely a fragrance of sentimentality in there. Let's not dismiss that or deny it, and that's sweet and that's wonderful. But this love of which I speak is what Jesus, I think, was referring to by the narrow gate. It is rigorous, it is demanding, although, unfortunately, the rest of that quote has to do with very few can pass through. And my thesis, I hope you don't mind, Jesus, is that everyone can pass through. It is only narrow in so far as we think of love as we often think of love as something we're doing wrong.

Mike Petrow: Yeah.

Mirabai Starr: I'm not loving enough or I'm too loving. But this is a love that welcomes all that we are, as Richard Rohr so often teaches us, everything belongs in this love, but we have to show up for it and we have to do our work. There is an element, and Father Thomas Keating, who was a dear friend and mentor of mine, the architect of the contemporary centering prayer movement, also taught me that this path of love requires courage and fortitude because it's so much easier to actually just keep your heart closed.

Mike Petrow: Oh my God, yeah. It's so interesting. I love everything you've said there, especially for me, as for the listeners that this means something to, and if not, don't worry about it, but as an Enneagram four, five, and I constantly test as a four with a five-wing or a five with a four-wing, that's big heart center and it's big intellect center. And I feel like so often in my life I've been asked to choose between the two.

Mirabai Starr: Yes.

Mike Petrow: And there's this beautiful practice, it's very ancient in the Christian tradition called the prayer of the heart. And the basic simple instruction is that you sink the mind into the heart and you look there for other eyes, and it's the eyes that open when you align your mind and your heart. It's both together. But as you've said, wow, there's a lot to feel if you go through life with an open heart, goodness gracious.

Mirabai Starr: And the other thing about living with your heart open, and this is part of where the rigor comes in, is that it's harder to other eyes. It's harder to make the other evil and wrong and stupid, and all of the things that we're tempted to judge people for on a daily basis in small and larger ways. It's disarming the heart creates a felt experience of our unity with all beings.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. Well, and I suppose even with ourselves because I feel like we other ourselves very often. We want to cut off our sadness, our grief, we want to cut our shadow in Jungian terms. We don't want to look at the parts of ourselves that don't get rewarded or are a little bit more difficult to deal with. And I think we lose the best of ourselves when we do that.

Mirabai Starr: We do, don't we? I agree.

Mike Petrow: It's interesting. It's sad to me that I think if we're honest, and many of us know that some of the best even spiritual communities that we've been a part of have accidentally othered. As soon as I become a part of a community and that community becomes exclusive, there are insiders and outsiders. And I think mysticism leads a lot of us beyond that. But it can, to

use Richard's language at the top of the conversation, it can sometimes take us beyond our containers.

And so what I love about your book, and here's the next question I have for you. I'm thinking about a lot of our audience that's maybe living life after church. Even for some of our listeners who still go to church, it seems like the attendance at the old centers of mainstream religious representation are on the decline, but somehow spirituality seems to be on the rise, which is an interesting dichotomy. I'm curious, what do you think it means that a lot of people are moving beyond the old one-stop-shop notion of going to church or temple or ashram or any spiritual center to get all their spiritual needs met in one place and even potentially to have one place that tells them what to do and think?

Mirabai Starr: Yeah, exactly. And oh my gosh, I wish I was the kind of person that could just buy that. I'd love for someone to tell me what to do and think. I spend so much time wrestling with what to do and what to think, so it would be nice. I understand the temptation, although I've never bought into it probably because my parents were agnostics who really stressed thinking for yourself. But what I'm noticing about this rise of the so-called spiritual but not religious community of people or demographic is the spiritual part.

So it's easy to say they're leaving the church in droves or the temple or the ashram or the mosque, and that is true. I do think that there is a mass exodus from traditional places of worship and the communities there. But there is, as you pointed out, Mike, this rising thirst for the sacred, for ritual, for magic. Magic, not in the sense of hoaxes and spells, but magic in the sense of having access to that feeling of radical amazement as Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great 20th century rabbi, peace activist philosopher called it radical amazement. That is getting stronger and also a desire for community, for fellow travelers. And it used to feel, I think, to people not that long ago, they either belonged to a church if they wanted to have community, spiritual community, beloved community, or they were on their own looking for God in these solitary spaces, but that's no longer the case. Either churches have become progressive and open enough or spiritual communities have to accept that rising spiritual but not religious impulse and meet it, or people are forming these pop-up spiritual families.

Mike Petrow: Yeah, I love that. And it's interesting because while I think a lot of our listeners at one point may have found themselves at home in a spiritual community and now are a part of the tribe of wandering exiles, I also think there's a lot of our listeners who are a part of a spiritual community. But I wonder if there's a point in our journey and maturity where even healthy participation in a community still takes us beyond that one-stop-shop attitude that I'm going to go to one place and it's going to meet all my needs or one group of people and they're going to give me everything I need. So I'm curious about how people now recognize that there's so many ways to find all the elements of a full spiritual life, and even all the implements, like music and good teaching and good ritual and good community and service that can be found all across our lives. So my question for you is, where do you think people are finding those things these days?

Mirabai Starr: I don't want to break the rules here, Mike, but I'd love to hear what you're thinking. What do you think people are thinking?

Mike Petrow: Sure. Well, I think it's everywhere. I think there's a terrifying loneliness when we step out of recognizing that we can go to one building at one time and get everything we need. And then I think that loneliness becomes a liberation. Because when we realize we're living in a crowded cosmos, we're surrounded by it. Church can be our hike on a Sunday morning. Sacred music, my favorite band, Cloud Cult, just came out with a new album. And they are the most spiritual and liturgical music I've ever heard. And they're not setting out to create a church experience, but they do speak to my spiritual life. Our friendship is such a gift and such a place of wise mentorship and teaching for me. And I have your books and the books of so many different spiritual teachers, and I can be fed and connected in so many different ways.

And I think online reality, while it's limited, also creates so many different opportunities, as does the willingness to see every single person that we interact with as a reflection of the divine. So I think as walls break down, new opportunities present themselves. That would be the beginning of my answer. What do you think?

Mirabai Starr: That's perfect and beautiful, and I just wrote a book about that.

Mike Petrow: I know you did. That's why I'm asking. I love it. I love it.

Mirabai Starr: I really agree with you, and I think so many of you listening have that relationship with nature, where nature, it becomes the sacred portal that you step through into a unit of experience and it's reliable. Another reliable one is being with the dying. That's why so many people on our spiritual path are attracted to hospice work or midwives too. Those two thresholds are so powerful. And in your case, Mike, and in mine, sitting with people who are grieving, these are all such sacred spaces. I try to be of service, yes, but it's also selfish because there's no one I know that is more authentic and spiritually alive often than someone whose heart has been shattered by profound loss.

Mike Petrow: Yeah, it's so true. A heart broken is so often a heart broken open. It's amazing to me how it removes the veil and the distractions and the scripts of ordinary life and gives us a look at what really, really matters.

Mirabai Starr: Yes.

Mike Petrow: Okay, so can't not ask you at least one question about the spirituality of grief. What is one tidbit of wisdom you'd give our listeners? This is where you and I first connected, and it's such a deeply appreciated stream of our friendship and what I learned from you as a teacher. What is one insight you can offer our listeners for recognizing grief as a mystical path?

Mirabai Starr: Well, so much of our spiritual teachings from all traditions emphasize transcendence, to rise above and beyond the limitations of our human experience into this greater cosmic reality. But grief is an opportunity to almost do the opposite, to just come shooting into the center of our own exploded heart and find refuge there because it is the most sacred place that we've ever encountered. And so it's hard to tell a freshly grieving person, just stay with it, don't turn away, don't run away, don't fly away, don't medicate yourself out of this, don't spiritualize it even. But come home to your own shattered heart and tenderly, lovingly, even with devotion, devotion perhaps to someone you love who's died. Stay right there.

And when we do, I notice for myself in my most profound grief experiences, my most shattering losses, and in the many people that I have sat with, that the fragrance, I call it, of the sacred begins to emanate from the very embers of whatever burned down as a result of that loss. The fire of loss sweeps through the landscape of our heart, takes it to the ground, but what it leaves behind is this, well, you said it earlier, Mike, when you talked about the distractions are taken away, the obstacles, the veils, I think you called it also, are lifted. And paradoxically, again, paradox, we are granted access when we are grieving to a much more direct, that is mystical experience, the love that triggers the pain. If we didn't love that which we lost, we wouldn't be grieving. That love is at the heart of our broken heart.

Mike Petrow: I get chills. Words fail. It's so true. I used to be a minister. I did a lot of funerals, and because I had lost my brother young to suicide, I got asked to do a lot of funerals for young people. I got asked to do a lot of funerals for folks who had lost their lives to depression. And then because I lost a mom early, I got asked to do a lot of funerals for folks who'd lost parents. And as I know you've been there in that moment with folks, and I've never started a funeral without somehow saying, "We grieve much because we love much." And the depth of our pain is always, always, always proof of the depth of our love. And we live in a world that it seems would like to distract us from the depth of our pain and the depth of our love and the depth of our own heart.

Mirabai Starr: Yes.

Mike Petrow: Oh, that's why I'm so grateful for your work and what you bring us back to. I'm so taken with, we've talked about this a bunch, this notion of being spiritual but not religious. That gets thrown around a lot today, and I think it's great because I think we've had too much of being religious but not spiritual. And yet the world's major religions offer us so much wisdom for spirituality. I sometimes refer to myself as religious but not religious. You do this better than anyone else I know. How do these major traditions offer us resources in a world where the mystical is becoming more personal and less institutional and more people are craving it, but maybe don't want to sign up for the organization or the institution or have to identify as something, how do we get the ancient wisdom of these traditions without feeling like we have to join them?

Mirabai Starr: Or without feeling like we're just skimming the surface and moving ourselves to the bright shiny bits and not showing up for the rigor of practice?

Mike Petrow: Right, yeah, the depth comes in the deep immersion. That's where the transformation takes place.

Mirabai Starr: And that depth, that deep immersion that you speak of doesn't have to mean 11 years in the monastery before you qualify for a deep experience. So that's the thing that I want to say is that you can go to mass, attend mass at your local neighborhood Roman Catholic Church and have a profound experience as you behold the ceremony of the Eucharist, even if you're not a Catholic and can't partake, say, just bearing loving witness with an open, curious heart, mind and listening to the liturgical prayers and the songs and the feeling, the coalescing of community, imagining the stories that have unfolded among the families in that sanctuary, all of that, if you show up with a depth of openness and willingness to not judge, not otherize, you can be profoundly and permanently transformed by that encounter.

I'm not saying that means that you now know everything about the Roman Catholic Church, but most Roman Catholics don't either. But you can have a true spiritual experience without having to do all of the things associated. And there is something beautiful about, say, that your childhood religious traditions. Maybe on Christmas or an Easter, you come back to your hometown church or something and the smells and the hymns and the feeling of your childhood and therefore childlike, which Jesus called the holiest thing of all, relationship with the divine comes back, or at least you have access to it. And that's beautiful too.

For me, I grew up with a guru, Neem Karoli Baba, who was an holy man from India, and I grew up with kirtan, that is sacred chanting in the Hindu tradition and the gods and the goddesses and the colors and the smells and the stories. So right now, this time of year is what they call the Mahasamadhi of the guru, which is the time that he died that Neem Karoli Baba, who is Ram Dass's guru, Krishna Dass's guru for any of you who know those folks. And so people gather here in Taos because there's an ashram, as you well know, Mike. In fact, Richard's visited me here and I've taken him to that ashram.

So we go to the ashram, we're chanting, we're partaking of those Indian foods and sweets, and we're greeting each other. And all of those prayers and rituals are in my bones. And I love it so much. Is it my one-stop-shop? Nope. It's not only not enough, but it's a container, to use Richard's language, that has become way too small for my wild heart.

Mike Petrow: That's so good. And what I appreciate about that is the invitation to stay connected to the rituals and the traditions that have given us life, and then also to expand beyond. I feel like once you experience the sacred in depth, everything becomes sacred, right?

Mirabai Starr: I think so.

Mike Petrow: Yeah. It's a little bit silly, but I have so many religious traditions and spiritual rituals that are so meaningful to me. And then I've also revisited precious things from my childhood. And I've found, for example, around the holidays, Dickens Christmas Carol, of all things, has become a radically transformative sacred text for me, where it's this thing that ushers me into this gift of looking at my past, present, and future and asking what's haunting me and where it's taken me. It's extraordinary where the mystical can show up when we make space for it.

And I do appreciate that the depth that we encounter, wherever we encounter it first, doesn't put fences up, but actually opens doors for us to experience it everywhere else. And speaking of the depth of particular traditions and teachers, which again, I love how deeply you engage teachers from so many different traditions. This book that we're talking about on this podcast is from Richard who's a Franciscan friar, and it's based on the wisdom of Saint Francis, who I know that you've written on as well. And so can I ask you, how did you first encounter Francis as a Christian teacher in mystic?

Mirabai Starr: Oh my gosh. I don't know if anyone's ever quite asked me that before. By the way, Richard wrote the foreword to my little book about St. Francis, well, really Francis and Clare, and that's how I met him.

Mike Petrow: Oh, I love that.

Mirabai Starr: Yeah. Okay. My first encounter as a young Jewish girl from a non-religious family, living in a hippie community in Taos, New Mexico, exposed to Hinduism, Buddhism, Sufism and Taos Pueblo native wisdom, I first encountered Francis in Kazantzakis's novel, Saint Francis.

Mike Petrow: Really? Oh, wow.

Mirabai Starr: And I was 16. Well, it was probably Brother Son, Sister Moon, frankly, before that.

Mike Petrow: Sure, of course.

Mirabai Starr: And I think Brother Son, Sister Moon actually was based on the Nikos Kazantzakis.

Mike Petrow: And that's the movie. If anyone hasn't seen it, you should definitely watch it.

Mirabai Starr: Yes. Brother Son, Sister Moon, it's a classic, although it seems a little on the cheesy side now.

Mike Petrow: Probably so.

Mirabai Starr: It was so good for all those years. And so reading that novel... Kazantzakis was a mystic. The Last Temptation of Christ, of course, was Kazantzakis novel and Zorba the Greek. And so St. Francis led me to both of those others, the novel Saint. Francis, but his novel about Saint. Francis was so poetic, so wise, so reverently irreverent that it just broke me open. And Francis became, for me, a doorway to the sacred. I was also, at the same time, reading The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, who was an incredible 20th century, very much interspiritual saint from India, the autobiography of a yogi about Yogananda. I was reading all of these different spiritual books, but they were all by men about the male experience, frankly. So that's all we had at that time, pretty much, all we had access to mostly, but Francis through the pages of Kazantzakis novel just set my heart on fire.

Mike Petrow: Goodness gracious. There's a million things I could say about Francis, and we would go way over time if we do. I love how Francis's mysticism is so unafraid of suffering and so connected to service in the world. It's such a participatory mysticism. What do you think is the gift of Francis for our understanding of the mystical?

Mirabai Starr: Well, it's such a cliché, as Richard points out, to see Francis as just the guy would hold out his hand and the birds would land in his palm, and that's why he's in gardens all across the world. But Francis's connection with nature was authentically the essence of his spiritual life. His last prayer, the Canticle of the Creatures, was in praise of Brother Son and Sister Moon and Sister Death. He referred to death as sister and our sister, Mother Earth. He combined sister and mother when he talked about the earth. It was an embodied, participatory, intimate, tender relationship with ultimate reality.

And that's really what this book is about. In that sense, it's utterly Franciscan and therefore, how we treat others, other creatures, other humans, and in fact, the planet herself is intimately entwined with that sense of belonging to each other. I was just thinking as you were talking about Francis and how in my mind, when I hear Francis, I immediately translate into Francesco, which is his Italian name, Chiara, Clare. But that's not because I'm so fancy that I speak Italian, that I insist on the proper Italian nomenclature, it's that I have nicknames, I've never said this publicly, for all of the mystics and saints.



Mike Petrow: Really?

Mirabai Starr: I call John of the Cross Juanito. In my mind, Teresa of Avila is Teresita, so Juanito and Teresita. Mary, Mother Mary is always Maria. It's not that that's like a little pet name. It's a name that reflects my feeling of intimacy with these beings.

Mike Petrow: And I love that because I love the invitation for us to remember that these are not folks just who've given us words on a page, but they are people, I genuinely believe, that we can interact with and see and know as presences in our own life.

Mirabai Starr: Yes, yes, yes.

Mike Petrow: Yeah, that's beautiful. I love everything about that. You are now challenging me and inviting me to come up with nicknames for all my favorite mystics.

Mirabai Starr: Starting with Origen.

Mike Petrow: Oh, yeah, absolutely. I absolutely have to do so, and I will. And since you mentioned Origen, I have to say, as well, when I think of what Francis's intimate relationship with Sister Death, Origen has this very quippy thing he says. He says, "The last enemy to be destroyed will be death, and death is destroyed by being made no longer an enemy." So there's this beautiful thing of befriending death and befriending reality. Goodness gracious. Before we run out of time, lightning round, I have two short questions that are too big to give short answers, but I'm going to ask you to give short answers.

Mirabai Starr: Okay.

Mike Petrow: Okay, here we go. You've written this other beautiful book on how love is the underlying genius of Judaism, Christianity, Islam. God of Love is the book. I have to ask, in the life of Francis and in these great traditions, how is love so central to the mystic and our living full lives?

Mirabai Starr: Oh my gosh. Short answer?

Mike Petrow: I know, I know. Sorry.

Mirabai Starr: There are two streams that reflect the primacy of love in the mystical traditions, and we see it in Francis so clearly. One is the fire of desire for union with God. The other is the urgency of walking the way of mercy, of doing justice in this world, of acting that love out with our feet, so to speak. And they come together, I feel, in the Franciscan tradition in such a beautiful way.

Mike Petrow: I love the idea that love opens its heart, and then it ties on its boots and rolls up its sleeves and gets to work to make love more real in the world. That's so beautiful. Okay, last lightning round question. You tell so many good stories in your book and you tell so many good stories every time we talk. You tell so many good stories in all of your books. I can't wait for folks to read your book. How do you think it is that our personal and collective myths, and I don't mean our falsities, I mean our stories, are the places of meaning-making and the places of mysticism? I think so many of us, especially in the contemplative world,

are drilled into thinking that mystical experience is wordless. And I know that it is in a lot of ways, and yet I feel like story can be mystical as well. What do you think?

Mirabai Starr: Yes, in the same way that music, as we've talked about, can be, or a connection with nature can be. In Buddhism, they talk about the finger pointing at the moon, and all of these different ways can wake up our hearts. So for me, the myths and stories are essential to serve as bells to wake up our hearts. And patriarchy and the hierarchies of the churches and the established institutionalized religions, even though they're based on mythic roots, they come from mythic roots, they leave them behind as superstitious at the risk of discounting and squandering that which actually is most reliable to quicken and ignite our love.

Mike Petrow: Oh, I love that so much. And I think it's so absolutely essential to our experience of it. And like I said, it's what I love about having you as a friend, as a teacher. I think about, Richard has this great quote in this chapter that we're talking about this week where he says, "Franciscanism is truly a sidewalk spirituality, for the streets of the world, a path highly possible and attractive for all would be seekers. You don't need to be celibate, isolated from others, more highly educated or in any way superior to your neighbor to walk this path." And it's a path of ordinary mysticism. I love it.

I love, for me, in our friendship, my image of getting to learn from your teaching will always be sitting around a campfire with you and a bunch of folks, and you leading us in songs and asking people to tell stories and helping us see the mystical moments in all that. I'm so excited for this book, *Ordinary Mysticism: Your Life as Sacred Ground*. Would you give our listeners an invitation and a blessing to their own ordinary mysticism as we draw our conversation to a close?

Mirabai Starr: That's amazing. You just read my little mind, Mike.

Mike Petrow: I love it.

Mirabai Starr: What I really want to say to you all is that you are a mystic. If what it means to be a mystic is to walk through this world looking through the eyes of love and perceiving love, and therefore, anything and everything that you do with the intention and the attention on the sacred that is always brimming from the heart of everything, including our most difficult experiences, counts and belongs, and that includes your stories. So Mike, you brought up this question about our myths and our stories, and that means the story of your life is the holy book. It is the story that needs to be told. And please, y'all, do not discount your story. Don't let anyone tell you that it's not about you. It is about you. When you tell your story with authenticity and specificity, it becomes everyone's story.

Mike Petrow: Oh my God. Amen and amen. What an amazing note to go out on. Mirabai, love you so much. Can't wait for our listeners to read your book. Listeners, can't wait to go through Richard's book with you. My gosh, what a gift to have your voice and your wisdom with us today. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Mirabai Starr: Thank you, Mike.

Mike Petrow: Paul, I missed you.

Paul Swanson: Mike, it was a little bit of a bummer to not be there with you, but I got the chance to listen to it, and that was an incredible conversation between you and Mirabai. How did it feel from your end being engaged in that conversation?

Mike Petrow: I love talking to Mirabai just about any topic. I love this chapter. What a great opening to this book with Richard, and what a beautiful pairing to talk to Mirabai about her latest book, *Ordinary Mysticism: Your Life as Sacred Ground*, because I have always experienced Mirabai as exactly that, as an ordinary mystic. She's one of the most brilliant people I've ever met. She's taught comparative religions, translated mystics, taught all over the world as a spiritual teacher, and yet sitting around a fire or sitting around a kitchen table with her, I experience the mystical reality of the divine light and love breaking through in every moment of every ordinary interaction, like laughing, eating, hiking. It's great. So it was fun. It was really, really fun to feel that come through in the conversation, I hope.

Paul Swanson: I felt that she walks the talk and everything that she shares comes from a very, very deep place from within her heart, her study, her experience, even the way that she's got pet names for mystics and it helps comfort me knowing my own relationship with dead mystics and how they live on in us. And those conversations are real and impact us in our ordinary every day.

Mike Petrow: It's true. My favorite thing you've ever said, Paul, is that when you spend a lot of your time reading the mystics, it starts to feel like all of your best friends are dead. And yet, as Jim says, we experience the deathless presence of the beloved and they're there with us. I say this about Dr. B all the time, and it's true of Mirabai as well. They help me live in a crowded cosmos where everything is a revelation of the divine. I love it. That's really great. And that's what we want for our listeners, right?

Paul Swanson: That's it, that's it. And this season we'll have some new voices joining us and there'll be sometimes where we're in conversation solo with some of these guest folks like you did today. And what's fun about that, too, is that I get to then be squarely in just the listener mode listening to this, and you'll get that chance as well, where it's a different way of approaching this work. And sitting with the conversation I just heard between you and Mirabai, there's some things that arose that I think would be lovely to leave with listeners. But what's your sense of maybe one of the sharpest points that you saw as an invitation to invite others into as a way of further reflection?

Mike Petrow: Goodness gracious, I think I have this year finally solidified the fact that two of my... I have so many spiritual practices and this year one, I've become really comfortable with being in nature as one of my primary spiritual practices. But the other one is, this is a really good one, sharing and listening to the stories of others might be my favorite spiritual practice. It's why I'm so excited that we have so many great guests. And like you said, we have some friends on the CAC staff who are going to be helping us out with the hosting this year. So they'll be a couple different voices that you'll hear, and it won't always be the two of us together, but my God, just getting the chance. Mirabai said this thing, your life is the holy book. That's the one that hit me the most, and it's the last thing she said, but I love that. It's what Origen taught me, that we learn to read our own lives as a sacred text and every single person around us is scripture come alive. What about for you, Paul?

Paul Swanson: Yeah, I think that one certainly shimmers, and I think in tandem with that was when you had asked her a question and she responded around the radical amazement when you guys are talking about community and that desire for community and how those don't always fall within the bounds of what we consider the typical religious practices. They're there, but there's an expansion there in our everyday ordinary lives. And Richard certainly points to that in his highlighting of Franciscan mysticism. And I feel like Mirabai even flings the doors even wider open through her own embodiment and teaching and with this latest work of hers.

Mike Petrow: Yeah, it's so true. It's so true. And so I'm so excited for our readers, one, if you want, you don't have to read the book to listen to the podcast, you're going to get plenty out of it, just the same. But if you want to pick up Richard's *Eager to Love* or pick it up again and go through it with us chapter by chapter. Two, cannot recommend enough that you order yourself a copy of Mirabai's latest book, *Ordinary Mysticism: Your Life as Sacred Ground*.

And in the spirit of looking at your life as sacred ground, I think this is the first thing to invite our listeners into at the end of this first episode. Again, Mirabai said it this way, and it was so good. The story of your life is the holy book. It's the story that needs to be told. And I love when she said, "Please, y'all don't discount your story. Don't let anyone tell you that it's not about you. It is about you." When you tell your story with authenticity and specificity, it becomes everyone's story. So I think my invitation would be for folks to look for all the ways that ordinary mysticism is breaking into their story and listen to the ordinary mystical stories of the people around them.

Paul Swanson: What an invitation. I love that.

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Dorothy Abrams: Dorothy Abrams.

Brandon Strange: Brandon Strange.

Corey Wayne: And me Corey Wayne. The music you hear is composed and provided by our friends, Hammock. And we'd also like to thank Sound On studios for all of their work in post-

production. From the high desert of New Mexico, we wish you peace and every good.