

**Tami Simon:** You're listening to *Insights at the Edge*. Today my guest is Mirabai Starr. Mirabai teaches philosophy and world religions at the University of New Mexico, and is the author of new translations of *Dark Night of the Soul* by John of the Cross, and most recently, *God of Love: A Guide to the Heart of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. With all of her work, Mirabai uses fresh, lyrical language to help make timeless wisdom accessible to a contemporary circle of seekers. With *Sounds True*, Mirabai has created a series of books highlighting many famous mystical figures, including Hildegard of Bingen, St. Francis of Assisi, St. John of the Cross, and St. Teresa of Avila.

In this episode of *Insights at the Edge*, Mirabai and I spoke about interspirituality and the transformative power of practicing within many faith traditions simultaneously. We also talked about the loss of her daughter and the connection between grief and spiritual longing. We also talked about what it means to experience, in a contemporary way, the dark night of the soul and the experience of being naked with the beloved, unknowing. Finally, we talked about Mirabai's personal experience translating the work of many great mystical figures. Here's my conversation with Mirabai Starr.

Mirabai, I want to begin by talking with you about what you call "interspirituality," or, in more brazen language, "spiritual promiscuity." And just to begin with, talk a little bit about this term, "interspirituality," what that means.

**Mirabai Starr:** Well, this was a term coined by the late Brother Wayne Teasdale. And it refers to the interconnectedness of all the wisdom ways of the world, and having an experience through spiritual practice, primarily, of other religions and spiritual traditions. So it differs from the interfaith movement in the sense that the interfaith movement—which is a wonderful thing that's been going on for at least a hundred years, a conversation between established, organized religions in the name of peacemaking really.

The interfaith movement has traditionally been an intellectual one where ordained representatives of various religious institutions come together in conversation to try to understand one another, open their minds to one another, and create understanding, which is a very important peacemaking activity, and I think it's been a very successful one. It really started, in many ways, with the first Parliament of World Religions, where Vivekananda came to the West and really introduced Eastern thought to a Western mind. So that conversation's been unfolding for a very long time in very productive ways.

But the interspiritual movement is much more about sharing prayer, sharing spiritual practice, sharing those heart-opening and spirit-transforming experiences of the divine that happen

when you actually engage in what matters most at the heart of these different religions. So that's the primary difference. Interspirituality is really about having a direct experience of other wisdom wells, dipping into those wells and drinking from them deeply and allowing those waters to change who you are. So it's a much more transformative kind of experience.

Now, I don't think that Brother Wayne would have necessarily approved of my language around it when I talk about, "spiritual promiscuity." So I don't want to put that on him.

**TS:** That's your own term.

**MS:** That's my own term, and it's a term that works for me because I'm a very embodied person. I'm not so much an intellectual. I'm not really interested the socio-political dimensions and the historical unfoldings of religion as I am in the heart. Wayne was all about the heart, definitely. *The Mystic Heart* was the first book in which he first coined that term, "interspiritual." So I'm not saying that he wasn't about the heart, but my relationship with the divine is extremely personal and sensual, and definitely has an almost erotic quality of longing and of intimacy with the beloved.

**TS:** What I think is interesting about this term "spiritual promiscuity" is it tunes us into this idea that, for many people dipping into these different wells, as you're describing, it does sound like something taboo or wrong. That being spiritual monogamous—I practice within a tradition, a that is what is good and respectable, but I'm actually going to practice the mystical techniques of many different traditions. I mean, does that work? Doesn't that create a lot of confusion?

**MS:** Right. I'm so glad you asked this question, Tami, because this is really up for me right now. With this new book, *God of Love*, I'm really stepping out and saying—and advocating, not just saying—that for myself, it has been a really important thing to practice many different religions and spiritual traditions. I'm actually advocating, in the name of peacemaking, [that] people try this technique of visiting the houses worship and becoming intimate with the expressions of the divine in not one, not two, but several religious and spiritual traditions. I feel that there is an alchemy that happens when we go to the alters of these different sacred spaces and bow down there. So I'm not talking about a superficial dipping from these various paths and traditions. I'm not saying that we should be spiritual dilatants. This is not a shopping mall that I'm talking about. This is a radical practice of showing up completely, and wholly, and naked in different religious and spiritual traditions and practicing deeply.

Now, it's hard to do that with too many of them. Three or four, I think we can manage. I think we're deep and wide enough beings, we human beings, that we have the capacity to love in many ways. I actually advocate monogamy in marriage or in a relationship. I don't think this works well in the realm of intimate relationships on the human level. But I think in cultivating intimacy with the divine, the more the better.

But it's not a fluffy, feel-good spirituality that I'm talking about here, Tami, where we just take what feels nice in different religious and spiritual traditions and disregard the hard parts. I'm talking about a narrow path, as Jesus put it, where we give our lives to the divine, to the sacred, to the great mystery in everywhere we can encounter it. To not say "no." You know, in the Koran it says, "Which of my treasures will you deny?" And my answer is, "None, thank you very much, I'll take them all. And I'll take them as deeply and as intimately as I can. I will show up all the way."

**TS:** Now, I want to take this a bit further. I think this is a really important conversation for our time, a time in which people are exposed to many of the different paths and techniques of different traditions and do often find themselves confused—not necessarily deepening along a narrow path, but more and more [feeling] a sense of getting spread out and diffused. I have to say for myself that was my experience, and when I started working deeply in one tradition, then I was able to visit different other traditions. But I had trained myself within a certain path that I had a depth of inner experience, and then I could go and visit other places. Yet I had a home base.

**MS:** You were anchored.

**TS:** So you're describing something different than that. And I guess I want to hear more about [if that] can that really work.

**MS:** OK. You used an important word when you described your process, and that was "discipline." I am not advocating a light, fluffy, feel-good spirituality. What I'm saying is that this path of interspirituality requires almost more discipline than picking one particular tradition and going deep in that tradition. Because it means that whatever tradition you encounter and open your heart to, you are willing to do the work that that discipline requires. So I really think it's important to find teachers in various disciplines.

So, for instance, I'll speak from my experience if that would help. When I was around 15, I lived at the Lama Foundation, which is kind of the original interspiritual community on the planet in northern New Mexico, which was near my home of Taos. And at Lama I was exposed to many of the different religious and spiritual traditions in the world. Many great,

great spiritual teachers came through Lama Foundation. And I remembered the time [that] the word on the street—or on the mountain, really—was, “It’s nice to experience all the different traditions, but Mirabai, eventually you’re going to have to pick one and go deep. Because that’s really the only way to cultivate that kind of direct connection with the divine that you are so obviously so thirsty for,” which I was.

And so I had that voice in my head for decades saying, “OK, Mirabai, you’re 20 now, and you’re 30 now, and you’re 40 now, and you still haven’t picked one. You still look through the windows of each of these temples and altars, and you gaze in longingly wanting to be one of the people inside that has chosen their path and knows what it is, and cultivates the deep discipline within that tradition. Why can’t you do it?”

I realize now, at 50, [*laughs*] finally my path is interspiritual. And I was born Jewish, although my family was completely nonreligious. My mother often tells me now that everything she learned about Judaism, she learned from me.

**TS:** [*Laughs*]

**MS:** And of course, what I learned about Judaism was from Reb Zalman, who I love dearly, but that’s not exactly mainstream Judaism. So I do really identify with my Jewish heritage; that’s an anchor for me in the world. I observe the weekly Shabbat. I light the candles on Friday night, I say the prayers, and then on Saturday I unplug from the machine of the world. And it’s really hard for me to do because I’m an extremely busy person who’s very motivated in the world. But it’s such an important practice for me.

I celebrate the high holidays in the fall, I fast on Yom Kippur. There are various Jewish practices that really sustain me. When my daughter died, I sat shiva, and I did, in fact, an entire year of mourning, according to the Jewish ritual. So there are important Jewish practices that are a part of my life. I took initiation as a Sufi in various Sufi orders through my teens and early 20s, and feel still deeply connected with the mystical expression of Islam and Sufism.

I have a life-long Vipassana sitting practice. So in the Buddhist tradition, my daily meditation practice is Buddhist. And I could go on and on. Oh! All of my books are translations of the Christian mystics. So I have this deep connection with the mystical aspects of Christianity, and have really a deeply personal relationship with Christ and with Mother Mary. And I grew up in New Mexico, which has a strong native indigenous tradition that have had a very strong effect on me: my feeling of the sacredness of the land, and the daily practice I have of being

in the wilderness—all of that is this sustainable, multilayered interspiritual path. I have a discipline and a practice in each of these traditions, and I have teachers in each of these traditions.

I don't know if I could manage many more than the four or five that I have and keep the feeling of depth and connectedness that I have, but yes, it is certainly possible, unlike I was told at 15. It is not only possible, but Tami, I feel like it's important that more of us step into the wilderness of interspirituality, where there aren't a lot of guideposts, and be willing to do this interspiritual work.

**TS:** So I think one of the critiques of the model you're offering is that someone could "edit" the teachings. "I'll take the parts I like—I love doing this chanting practice, and I love doing this wilderness practice, but I can kind of make my own path, and I won't get cornered or confronted with the parts of the path I don't like because I edited those parts out." So how do you avoid that in interspirituality?

**MS:** I have a lot of faith in our common sense as human beings. And I think if we cultivate an inquisitive and critical mind, we won't have any problem. We're endowed with this faculty of reason and discernment that allows us to make informed decisions about our spiritual encounters. And if you've experienced any kind of spiritual path deeply, you know what it's like to be uncomfortable and to show up for the hard parts, for the parts that don't line up with your own sensibilities. There are parts of Judaism—many, many parts of the Hebrew scriptures trouble me deeply, let alone the history of violence and oppression that have happened in the Judeo-Christian traditions and, of course, in the Islamic tradition. All three have been guilty of taking certain parts of their scriptures and use them to hurt people. So if we stay in our integrity, and in our honesty, and show up for the hard parts and be willing to confront them, I think it's not only possible, but it's our birthright to use our ability to discern and discriminate. [It's our birthright to] freely admit that, "I am picking the parts of each of these religious and spiritual traditions that I love, that resonate with my heart, that help me to be a better human being and to treat other human beings and the planet herself more lovingly." That doesn't mean that I'm taking the easy way out, or that this is a path of convenience, or that other people just cherry pick the parts that they like and discard the parts that make them uncomfortable or challenge them. I am advocating that we use our faculty of discrimination.

**TS:** Have you ever had a teacher say to you, “In order to go deeper working with me, you’re going to have to make a decision, Mirabai”?

**MS:** Every time. Yes. Many times.

**TS:** And what do you do in those situations?

**MS:** I become a rebellious teenager, and I say, “I’ll try. I’ll try to be with you as deeply and completely as I can. I will try to do this task that you’re laying before me with as much integrity as I can, but I will not violate my intimate relationship with my beloved for the sake of pouring myself into the container that you’re asking me to use to confine my spirit.” It feels like that, Tami. It feels to me like a violation of my intimate relationship with my beloved to pick one to the exclusion of any other.

**TS:** Well, first of all, I want to say that I really respect your voracity. And you know, there aren’t many people taking the position you’re taking right now, so I also really respect that and admire it.

**MS:** Thank you. I think there are more and more of us. And believe me, I have tried to not take this position. I was hoping it was like teenage rebellion, and I would grow out of it. But instead I’m growing into it more and more. And I’m finding my companions, and there are many of us.

**TS:** Now, it seems to me that in today’s spiritual world, people have a few different ways that they can express and experience their spirituality. So we’ve talked about two. One would be [finding] a home base within a tradition, and yet within that home base you could still explore other paths, but you say, “This is really my home, and this is what I relate to primarily, but I’m an explorer also. So that’s one option.

Then the other option is what you’re describing. Someone’s part of three, or four, five different faith traditions that they’ve put together. But then there seems like there’s also a third type of person who says, “I’m actually not really drawn to any of the traditions. I don’t even think I want to work with a teacher. I’ve had some deep mystical experiences on my own or with nature, and I’m kind of just a free bird out there in the world.” What do you think of the third path?

**MS:** Yes. That’s a beautiful and valid path, and many of my closest friends walk that path. I would say the majority of the people in my life who I hang out with and resonate with are people in that third category, who actually find any version of organized religion suspect. I mean, my own parents were social justice Jews and political activists in the ‘60s in the anti-Vietnam War movement. [They] very consciously rejected organized religion because they

felt that most religious institutions were responsible for most of the suffering on the planet, both historically and currently. And so I grew up with a real suspicion of religion myself, and it's been in spite of all my conditioning—[my parents' position,] which makes a lot of sense to me—I've always been inexorably drawn to the flame of organized religion. So that third path of basically rejecting organized religion but affirming the sacred in everyday life, and in nature, and in deep personal spiritual experiences, I'm all about that.

And yet, I personally am drawn to the beauty and ancient wisdom I find in the established religious traditions. I'm afraid that people like me are going to jeopardize them [*laughs*] and they will become in danger of dying out because there will be people who will dissipate the beauty and potency of these established religious traditions by not picking one. I think that they're compelling enough, and that the ancient lineages that are so established in these traditions are strong enough and transformational enough and mysterious enough, that they won't die out. So I treasure my friends who are ordained clergy people in each of these traditions. And I try to serve them so that they will stay alive.

My friend Father Bill McNichols, who is a great iconographer priest, says that it's as important to give a prophet a drink of water as it is to be a prophet. So if I can keep bringing cups of something cool to drink for these prophets of the various traditions who are on fire with their message, then I will be grateful. I don't get to seem to be one of them.

**TS:** Now, you used this term, “the beloved.” You know, “No one can keep me away from my beloved or tell me what the container will be like for my relationship with the beloved.” Tell me what you mean when you use that word.

**MS:** That's a word that comes from the Jewish tradition, from the Song of Songs, and [is] very much in the Sufi tradition—God as Beloved. But aside from all the traditions, that has been my primary experience of the divine. I don't know if you've noticed, but I probably I used the word “God” maybe once in this entire conversation. I'm almost allergic to the “G” word because it's been so abused. But for me, my relationship with the sacred, with the mystery, has always been one of passionate love.

The thing about my love relationship with the divine, Tami, is that I am both a nondualist and a devotional maniac at the same time, in the same container. I was so thrilled years ago when I heard a Papaji tape, and Papaji, the king of nondualism, said, “I'm a *bhakta*. I'm a devotional being, also.” And I was so relieved because I have those two streams inside of me. There is one spiritual stream that connects with the sacred as the absolute undifferentiated suchness—the mystery. And I am much more interested in unknowing than I

am in knowing. That's why I'm so drawn to John of the Cross and the dark night of the soul, which is all about allowing ourselves to be stripped of any concepts or any ways of knowing or feeling God.

And yet, there's this other part of me that, like my namesake—Mirabai, the mystic poet, who was madly in love with Krishna the lord of love—that is an ecstatic who has a deeply intimate, almost erotic relationship with God. And those two streams have always comingled inside of me. But sort of like the message I got as a teenager at Lama Foundation about, "It's nice to experience all different traditions, but you're eventually going to have to pick one and make a commitment," I always felt I had to be either a non-dualist or a devotional being, and that somehow I was doing something wrong by being both. But both work beautifully for me. I dip in and out of resting in the emptiness and then singing to God with all my heart. I'm also a devotee of Neem Karoli Babba. I forgot to add that to my list of spiritual lovers.

**TS:** It's interesting, you have theistic traditions and non-theistic traditions in your interspiritual maps.

**MS:** Yes.

**TS:** So this is a type of, I don't know, something about the "promiscuity" term. I mean, it's humorous, but I also don't really like it in a way because it has negative associations.

**MS:** Let's find a different one.

**TS:** Yes. But I think what you're getting at here is that you can practice within a theistic tradition, and you do, and a non-theistic one, and find yourself going into the depths of spiritual experience.

**MS:** In fact, Tami, I cannot imagine doing it any other way than dipping into and out of those two realms. And then sometimes they come together. I think that what broke that open for me finally—I think I always had that inclination to have both a theistic and a non-theistic experience of the sacred, but I've experienced a lot of death in my life. And, as you know, 10 years ago my 14-year-old daughter, Jenny, was killed in a car accident, which was a very sudden, very tragic experience. It was like a bomb exploded in my life. And that bomb cleared the landscape of my soul so that there was nothing left. Everything was burnt to the ground. All my spiritual concepts were gone. They went up in flames.

What I found from this experience is that the only place for me to go was to drop down into that emptiness and breathe there. And as it turned out, this was the sacred place that all the mystics I had been reading, and translating, and speaking about, and appreciating all these years, were hinting at. This vast emptiness that I finally came to, I had glimpsed many times,

but was catapulted into through tragic loss of the being that was the most central being in my life, my daughter.

**TS:** Now, I know from your biography that your translation of *Dark Night of the Soul*, by John of the Cross, was actually published on the same day that your daughter died, which seems almost impossible to be true but is true.

**MS:** Yes. That is true. So Jenny disappeared the night before her body was found. And she had taken my car for a spin, and she had crashed and died. Her body was found the next day. And I was at home waiting for her, I hoped, to show up in person, and instead the police showed up to tell me that they had found her, and that she was gone.

A half an hour before the police came to the door, the UPS truck had driven down our driveway and delivered my first book, which was a translation, as you say, of *Dark Night of the Soul* by St. John of the Cross, which is the quintessential teaching on the transformational power of suffering, of spiritual nakedness—a book that had been the most important text on my spiritual path so far and continues to be. So the coinciding of those two events—the publication of my first book, which happened to be a translation of this teaching, and the death of my beloved daughter—I didn't miss the significance in that moment. But I couldn't pay attention to it at that moment.

But over the 10 years that have unfolded since Jenny's death, I have noticed that my spiritual path began that day. I mean, I was a serious little yogini at 15. I was following Ram Daas around the country as a teen. I was living in ashrams. I was doing deep, spiritual practice, primarily in the Hindu tradition, but also in the Sufi tradition. So I had been on a spiritual path for a very long time. Jenny died when I was 40. But I truly feel like it all began that day, and that there is something about these two things—tragic loss and the teachings of the mystics, particularly John of the Cross and power of unknowing—that have set my path, set my feet on this path, and lead me continually through the wilderness rather than on some kind of predictable road that I was hoping for. But I have come to celebrate this unknowingness with all my heart. And I owe that to Jenny.

**TS:** Now, I could guess myself how you've made sense of the translation being published and Jenny's death happening at the same time, for you, but I'd love to hear you talk about when you reflect on the last 10 years and the publication of that translation, how specifically it's informed you in your life.

**MS:** Well, John of the Cross, in *Dark Night of the Soul*, speaks very eloquently about the gift that God gives us when we are stripped of our conceptual faculties in the presence of the

divine mysteries. Well, there are two things that happen in the dark night of the soul. The first is that we're emptied of our sensory attachments to God so that it used to be perhaps on our spiritual paths that we got lots of goodies along the way.

Maybe we would chant Kirtan and feel that onrush of bliss that can happen when you chant the divine names, or whatever our spiritual practices may be. In Buddhism, it's that really good meditation when the mind quiets down and afterwards it just feels like you just were given the most delicious drink of water that your thirsty soul could ever hope for. So there are these spiritual goodies that come to us along the way.

John of the Cross says that in our spiritual maturity, there comes a point when we have to be emptied of those attachments to the spiritual pleasures of the path and be willing to rest in aridity, dryness. If, he says, we can mature further along the spiritual path, if we can withstand that aridity after the spiritual goodies we may have been receiving for many years along the way, and rest in that place of not getting fed on those lovelies, then we may be given the grace of the more harrowing night of the soul. [This] is the conceptual stripping, when our concepts, all of our ideas about who God is and what the spiritual path is, are taken from us, and nothing makes any sense anymore. Even the word, "God" is just an empty word.

And we find ourselves knowing nothing, believing nothing, and feeling nothing. And yet he says, "If we can show up for that experience, and not turn away from it," much like Pema's teaching of becoming present to the moment even when it's incredibly uncomfortable), "in the depths of that emptiness, we will begin to detect this ineffable sweetness that can only come to us when we've gotten out of the way, when we've been stripped, when we've been made naked before God."

So that's the kind of spiritual nakedness that allows for the intimacy of encountering the beloved and merging with the beloved. We can't make love with the beloved with our clothes on. And our clothes are our sensory attachments and our conceptual attachments. So, what's the connection with death, and loss, and grief? There is nothing like grief for stripping you. It's like being in a hurricane, or a tornado, or a forest fire, and your clothes are whipped off your body and you are left naked. In our culture, we're conditioned to do anything we can to avoid that feeling, to avoid that state. "Somebody put the clothes back on that girl because she's naked." I've got to cover myself up because this is way too vulnerable. This emptiness is bad news. John of the Cross says this emptiness is good news.

So I would never, in a million years, trade the life of my daughter for the spiritual nakedness I'm talking about. I would rather walk around the rest of my life as delusional as I could be if I could have Jenny back with me. And she would be a 24-year-old woman living her life. And yet, I can't. This is what happened. I'm showing up for the experience of the loss of my daughter to the best of my ability. And what I'm finding is by being present with this loss, as fully as I'm able—and it's hard. I'm asking people to sit in the fire. I'm asking people to breathe under water and discover that we are endowed with special gills that allow us to do that.

But as long as I'm here, I'm going to do my best to be present to the experience. And it resembles, from what I can tell, everything the mystics have taught us about resting in notknowingness, about being fully present to the moment no matter what it feels like. And, yes, like John of the Cross promised, there is an ineffable sweetness that comes into the shattered container of my heart, in the presence of unbearable anguish, that is the breath of the beloved. And I have taken refuge there.

**TS:** Now, I know you've been teaching grieving workshops for the past ten years and working with people who have also experienced deep losses. And I'm curious, when you work with people, where do you see them getting stuck and not able to move through what we could call this "initiatory process"? And then how do you help people move through that process?

**MS:** The most important thing for me is to not put my spiritual agenda on them. And so my first task with grieving people is to be present to them and to bear witness to their suffering. I don't try to tell them that there are blessings in their losses. I do read from the mystical texts that talk about longing for God, because I feel that there's this very important connection between grief and spiritual longing. That's the connection that I made inside myself and that I offer to share with other people.

But I never tell people that if you just hang in there, honey, there's going to be light at the end of the tunnel and you will see God in this loss. I don't want to do that. They would slap me, as I would have if someone said to me—and people do—the spiritual platitudes people throw around when someone is in deep grief. It's unbelievable. I could write a book on all the things not to say to grieving people. But I think that my ability to be present in different spiritual traditions is very much linked with this willingness to be present to the spiritual emptiness that is associated with grief.

So what I do when I work with people is first I let them tell their story. It's really important to be able to tell your story and to have compassionate witness to that story. Then I share some of my favorite beautiful and inspiring moving mystical texts, and then I encourage people to write. I do a lot of writing practice in the Natalie Goldberg style with people who are grieving, which is what Natalie calls that "wild mind practice of not censoring yourself," so that people are able to just write their way through it. And then I do a lot of contemplative practice with grieving people of sitting in the silence. All of those things together seem to build community in a circle of grieving people and help them make their own relationship with the unknown.

And that's what seems to make people feel most comforted. I always say to people, "This is not about consolation, it's about transformation. If you want to be consoled, I'm probably not your guy. This is about people who are willing to sit in the fire because they have nothing else to do. They have nothing to lose." And so it's not consoling at first, but ultimately what people seem to come away with is affirmation. They can know nothing, and that their loss has stripped them and that this is a beautiful thing.

**TS:** Now, you said something very interesting to me that I didn't wholly understand. You said for you, there's a very important connection between the experience of grief and spiritual longing. As you said that I was thinking, "Well, I definitely know people who are grieving who are not experiencing what I would call 'spiritual longing.'" And people have a lot of spiritual longing who aren't grieving. So what's the connection for you?

**MS:** For me, it turned out that when I was plunged into unbearable anguish—that was my mantra when Jenny died, "This is just unbearable anguish." And I would laugh because I was actually making a joke to myself. It's gallows humor, but it was that feeling of, "This is unbearable anguish. I can show up for this." But that when I did drop down into that state of unbearable anguish, of grieving the death of my child, it felt like familiar territory. What is this? What is this familiarity I'm feeling?

And then I recognized it. It was the longing I'd felt my whole life. The unquenchable longing for union with God. They felt the same. Then I realized that these mystics I had been translating and teaching about all these years, when they were talking about the suffering that they had experienced from being separated from God, it felt to me like the same quality I was experiencing in missing my child and in feeling, not only that I wanted her back, but that I had done something terribly wrong. You know, that I had failed my ultimate mission as a human being, as a mother, that my child had died. It's not supposed to happen that way. You're supposed to protect your child at all costs. It was as if Jenny was hanging off a cliff,

and I was holding onto her, and that she slipped through my hands. How could you let that happen?

The mystics often talk about this feeling of separation from God both as God's fault, "Why would you abandon me, my beloved?" And also something that they're accountable for, "What have I done to participate in this separation?"

**TS:** Now, as interspiritual Mirabai today, do you feel a lot of longing, in a general sense? Is that a big part of your spiritual life?

**MS:** No. If I have any longing at all, it's longing for the time when I did have that fire of longing.

**TS:** You're longing for longing?

**MS:** I'm longing for longing. But instead, what I feel—and I've heard many people who have experienced profound losses report a similar thing—is I feel a childlike joy in my life. I mean, I always had a childlike quality. I'm a small person, so people have often related to me in a kind of childlike way. And I've always had this kind of natural delight. But I've also had a really dark, brooding side. And the dark, brooding side is almost gone now. The childlike side has dominated.

I mean, I get in bad moods, and I get bitchy, and I get anxious, and all of those things, of course, but I will go into fits of rapture driving across La Veta Pass and seeing those aspen leaves in that tender, tender green. I am completely transported. Sitting here with you, before we began our conversation, you suggested that we sit for a moment, quietly, which is one of my favorite things to do in the whole world. And I felt myself going into this ecstatic state. And I thought, "Uh oh. I'm about to have a conversation with Tami. I better get my rational mind back in gear."

But just being with you, in your energy field, there's something about you that is very potent. And just sitting with you in the silence I was able to immediately drop down into that energy that you have that is so profound and a very high energy, if I may use that term. It just took me away. So it's very easy for me to go into these kinds of rapturous states. And I attribute that to being stripped so that the things that used to matter just don't matter anymore. The downside of that it's harder for me to take care of business sometimes.

**TS:** You seem to be doing all right.

**MS:** Thank you.

**TS:** You said something very interesting, which is this idea of being naked before God, before the beloved, being naked with the beloved. And I'd like to know what that means to you and how you make yourself more naked. How do you do that?

**MS:** The first thing is I try to not take myself too seriously. It helps because I'm married to someone that teases me mercilessly on a daily basis, so it's really hard to ever take myself too seriously. But the other thing is not trying to be any kind of spiritual authority or think that I've attained any particular wisdom even, is to continually take off whatever robes I might be tempted to put on, that I'm stepping up into my power now, that I've written so many books. There are all kinds of temptations to armor myself. That's what it is. That clothing I'm talking about is thinking I know something. And all the teachings of the mystics, and all the deaths and losses in my life, if they've taught me anything, they've taught me that I know nothing. And neither do you, and neither do you, and neither do you. Anyone who tries to pretend that they do makes me feel very trapped and uncomfortable, because then I'm being naked and they're all clothed. And no one wants to hang out with someone who's wearing a suit of armor when you're wearing a bikini, or nothing at all. Nothing at all is really my preferred spiritual state. So whenever I start to think I know something, I just chuckle to myself and take it off. Then I feel closer to the sacred again.

**TS:** Now, Mirabai, you've written and translated so many books—the translations of the writings of many of the great mystics. You've published with Sounds True a series of six books where you've written about St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis of Assisi, Our Lady of Guadalupe, among others. And I'm wondering, in the process of the writing and the translation of these books and the other books you've been writing, if you've had any experiences that wickedly surprised you—visitations, powerful dreams, that kind of thing?

**MS:** Yes.

**TS:** Tell me!

**MS:** [*Laughs*] You know, for a long time I didn't want to admit that to anyone because I'm like you. I mean, I just was talking about myself as an ecstatic, but I'm also a very grounded, practical person. I teach philosophy. I'm a philosophy professor. I'm all about critical thinking and discernment. And I grew up in the counterculture with a lot of woo-woo people in the spiritual scene that just make me feel very uncomfortable sometimes, that I have judgments about.

So the last thing I wanted to admit to anyone, Tami, was that when I am translating these saints and mystics, I feel like I'm channeling. But finally, I had to just admit that that's

absolutely what's happening. And, by the way, I don't think I'm anything special in that regard. I think any artist, any activist, anyone who's passionate about creativity or service in the world experiences what it's like to become a conduit for something higher, and better, and smarter, and often funnier than yourself, right? So it's not an unusual thing that I'm talking about, but I definitely experienced it. When I would translate the mystics or write about them, I would actually do a ritual. I still do. When I write, I sit down at my desk. I have an altar at my desk. I light a candle. I offer the light to the various saints and masters that I surround myself with. I close my eyes for a couple of minutes and become quiet inside, and then I get to work.

And somewhere in that little ritual, there is this slight, delicate, but important movement, a shift, where it's like a dance move. It's like tango. It's this little step to the side. And when I step to the side, that other thing steps into the place where I was just standing. And does the work. So I am not one of those writers that writes in a state of torment. *[Laughs]* It's an ecstatic experience for me 99 percent of the time because it doesn't feel like me doing it. It's so refreshing to get out of your own way and make a space for this wonderful onrushing of spirit that can come through. So I think it's one of the reasons that I'm so attached to my relationship with these mystics and to writing these books.

I complain and fetch, have little tantrums of being typecast as a translator on the mystics or as a commentator on the mystics and not speaking in my own voice. I feel sometimes that I'm in a gilded cage. It's wonderful sometimes to have the opportunity to do all these books, but can I please tell my story? Sometimes I feel that way. But I also am very addicted to that delicious feeling of being a conduit for these, for the great perennial wisdom that comes through the voices of these timeless wisdom figures. And it is an experience of being with them. It's *darshan*.

You know, in the Hindu tradition, *darshan* is sitting at the feet of the guru. I mean, it doesn't get much better than that, much more delicious, and much more intimate. So when I'm translating and speaking about the mystics, I'm sitting at their feet, and they're stroking my hair, and they're feeding me sweets from their own hand. And they're doing that so that I can then go feed the world.

**TS:** Now, what would you say to someone who might have a feeling of being drawn to either this mystic or that mystic, or to the writings of one of these mystics, and wants to know how to deepen their relationship with that mystic?

**MS:** You know, one of the questions you asked earlier relates to this. You were saying, “What do you say to people who might challenge you about”—well, you didn’t use the word “superficial” or “dabble” but I’m going to use those words—“dabbling in a superficial way in each of the spiritual traditions and not cultivating a deep discipline in any one of them. Just taking the parts that you like, that taste good, and discarding the rest.” And I answered that with my trust in our powers of discernment. And I would say that with the mystics, in translating the works of the mystics, when you’re doing the entire autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila, you can’t take out the parts you don’t like.

I’ve translated an entire 400-page manuscript, and there are a lot of parts of that book that rubbed me the wrong way, and would rub the sensibilities of any contemporary woman the wrong way, because Teresa’s talking about being an insignificant worm and things like that, constantly putting herself down. All of our feminist training, and all of the advances that we’ve made as women and as human beings are challenged by some of Teresa of Avila’s terrible self-deprecating language. But I didn’t feel like it was my place to leave that stuff out. So it’s there. I modified it a little bit. I softened it a little bit to make it a little more accessible to a contemporary audience, but it’s all there. And I feel like it’s when you want to have a relationship with these mystics; you have to take them in their entirety, with all of their neuroses. I mean, St. Francis of Assisi was an extremely neurotic guy. I’m madly in love with him. He’s one of the most important spiritual guides in my life. There are all kinds of reasons that I love him and identify with him, including his very human neurotic behavior.

**TS:** So here at the end of our conversation, Mirabai, I wonder if you would grace us by reading either a translation or something that you’ve written about one of the mystics that you love.

**MS:** I’m going to read the closing prayer from the St. Teresa of Avila book, which is part of the Sounds True series. So I wrote this prayer to Teresa of Avila: “Oh St. Teresa of Avila, I know that the great way is uncharted. And I know, too, you have walked there through that wilderness to the other side. Lean toward me now, and whisper a secret or two in my ear. Oh sweet lover of the Holy One, you say that my soul is a spectacular castle, the most beautiful place in all creation. You say that the Holy One himself would not live anywhere else, that he is, even now, waiting for me in the inner-most chamber, that all I have to do is go within. “How, sweet saint, do I begin? Oh, you gardener of the soul, help me to cultivate my soil so that I may be a place of beauty, in which the Holy One can walk and be refreshed. I have learned to draw the prayer from the deep well of grace and carry my buckets far across the

landscape to sustain my newly germinated virtues. I have engineered an elaborate system of aqueducts, used all my might to turn the crank of the waterwheel to channel that grace to my delicate sprouts. I have dug little ditches all the way from the Mother Ditch so that the water of prayer could seep into my garden from the earth herself. And now, gentle handmaid of the architect of all that lives, I await the grace of his gentle rain.

“Teach me, wise sister, to be patient. Teach me to love the emptiness. Help me to attain the prayer of recollection, gather my unruly thoughts, my distracting desires, my memories and projections. Point them all like arrows towards the center of my soul. Send me straight home. I will sit here until the mud settles in my cup and the water of my mind grows clear. Teach me, wise sister, to be still. Teach me to love the silence. Help me to attain the prayer of quiet.

“Once I have hollowed out my soul with intention, show the Holy One where I am. He will come and fill me. I have tasted the warmth of that grace. I have felt the brush of his lips on my face. I am empty now and ferociously hungry. Teach me, wise sister, to be nobody. Teach me to love my dying. Help me to attain the prayer of union. I know that I know nothing now, that my small self is a moth inexorably drawn to the divine flame. There is no turning back. Let lover melt into beloved. Let nothing remain but love. You have died in him again and again. Show me the way. Oh, Mother Teresa, help me to see the difference between embracing the earth and loosening my attachments to the world. Let me love my imperfect body, my unruly emotions. Let me honor creation and tender creatures. Let me eat with gusto, sleep in peace, and make beautiful and useful things with my own hands. Amen.”

**TS:** We’ve been speaking with Mirabai Starr, who has edited a series of six small books for Sounds True. They are six books of devotions, prayers, and living wisdom, covering the work of St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Michael the Archangel, Our Lady of Guadalupe, and Hildegard of Bingen. Mirabai, thank you so much. Thanks for driving up from Taos to come in person here to the Sounds True studio. It’s wonderful to be with you.

**MS:** Thank you, Tami, I loved being with you.

**TS:** Sounds True.com. Many voices, one journey.