

Tami Simon: You're listening to *Insights at the Edge*. Today, my guest is Mirabai Starr.

Mirabai Starr is known for her revolutionary translations of John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and Julian of Norwich. She renders mystical masterpieces accessible, beautiful, and relevant to a contemporary circle of seekers. She speaks and teaches nationally and internationally on the teachings of the mystics and contemplative practice, [as well as] the transformational power of grief and loss.

Mirabai Starr is the author of several books, including with Sounds True a series of little books on six different mystics including Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint Francis. She's also the author of a new book, *Caravan of No Despair: A Memoir of Loss and Transformation*. In this episode of *Insights at the Edge*, Mirabai and I spoke about writing about deep loss and grief, and how doing so can be an alchemical process. We talked about Mirabai's understanding of "the dark night of the soul" and the necessity of going through such a process of stripping away any sense we have of certainty about the spiritual path. Mirabai also read to us two excerpts from her new memoir, *Caravan of No Despair*. Here's my conversation—what Mirabai called "a holy conversation," and I think it's true—with Mirabai Starr:

Mirabai, you've written a gorgeous new memoir, *Caravan of No Despair: A Memoir of Loss and Transformation*. I want to start our conversation in a curious way, which is talking about writing about loss and grief and transformation. To begin, what [was] that process like for you? Also, I want to talk a little bit—I know now [that] you're teaching other people how to do this type of writing about loss and transformation. So, to begin, a little bit about what the process of writing *Caravan of No Despair*—what that was like for you.

Mirabai Starr: It took me 14 years to write this book. And yet, this version of the book—this final version that's now out in the world—only took me a year. But, it was incubating in my soul all along.

I find that so many people I speak to who have experienced profound, life-changing losses have a story to tell. It seems to me [that we need] to do that work inside of us for as long as it needs to before it can emerge. In my case, I actually had several false starts. I kept trying to write my story of loss and transformation, but I think the transformation part wasn't quite cooked.

So, I kept writing things that felt more like a journal—a personal journal. Maybe beautifully written, but still—it wasn't as accessible as it needed to be in order to be of service to others. And it was still very sad.

By the time this version emerged, it was sad, but it was something else. It *is* something else too—including funny and including peculiar. It didn't stop at sad.

So, there is this alchemy—an alchemical transmutation—that needed to happen in my case, where the lead of my personal story was able to go through its process—its fire; the fire of creativity. I'm not talking about the fire of suffering. There's that too. But, the alchemical process I'm talking about—that fire of transmutation has to do with the creative act itself.

So, the lead of my personal story had to go into the fire of my creative voice, really, to emerge as something golden—which doesn't mean “beautiful,” although I hope it is. But, [it's] something accessible—something of value. That's what gold is. It's of value—both to me and I hope to anyone that gets their hands on it when they need it most.

So, I feel like there's—for me, writing the book meant burning. I burned a lot as I wrote it.

It was OK with me. A lot of times, I just sort of looked around at the incredible energy that was coursing through my body as I relived some of my life's most painful—and, in many ways, unresolved—experiences. I just sort of chuckled in a way, going, “Wow. I feel this in every fiber of my being. Isn't this interesting?”

There is no way to write this book without immersing myself in the full catastrophe, as Zorba the Greek says. And I did. I felt ready for that when I finally was able to engage in the process.

What I just said, actually—I just had an epiphany about it. It wasn't like I waited for everything to be resolved or that everything resolved itself in the process of writing this book. What it meant was, I was OK with things being what they are and the groundlessness that was still there, even as transmutation unfolded.

TS: Part of what I hear you saying to that person who might be listening and reflecting on their own experience of loss—“Is it time for me? Is it the right time for me to dig in and start writing about this and sharing about this?” What more could you say to someone about this sense of timing?

MS: Well, I was trained by Natalie Goldberg—not in the sense that I formally studied with Natalie, but she was one of my first teachers—or I was one of her first students, actually, I should say—when she first began writing practice. I was 12 years old.

She was our teacher at the alternative school that we went to here in Taos, New Mexico, where I live. She was fresh out of graduate school [with] a degree in English, and she loved writing. She was experimenting with this group of 12-year-olds about what was called in those days “creative writing,” but about how to find our true voice.

Out of that, she developed what’s now known internationally as “writing practice.” So, my earliest training as a writer came in this way that cultivates what Natalie called “the wild mind”—which really came out of her experience with Zen training and with what’s called in Zen “beginner’s mind.”

What that was really about and continues to be about for me every time I sit down to write is about letting go of my preconceptions of what I need to say, and giving myself a topic. Then just go. Just write whatever arises, not censoring myself—just keeping my hand moving, whether it’s writing in a journal with a pen or writing on the computer. For me now, there’s a seamlessness. I can access the same wild mind on my computer as I can in the notebook.

So, the way that I recommend people get started—to see what you have to say—is to make a list of memories or topics. Just make a list. Like, I remembered one about how when my daughter died, I had that feeling that you sometimes get in a dream when you leave the baby at the gas station and drive away. After Jenny died, I walked around with that feeling in my belly—like, “Oh, shit. I left the baby at the gas station.”

So, that was a topic. “Leaving the baby at the gas station.” And lots of other topics—“The dogs that I have loved and lost.”

So, I make a list and then I give myself timed writing practice—in Natalie’s kind of vocabulary, although I do it in my own way. I adapt her method, but I let myself write story by story by story—and then begin to see a certain kind of thread weaving through the stories and whether that can create some kind of narrative arc that will carry it as a book.

It doesn’t have to be a book. Writing our stories of loss and transformation doesn’t mean that we have to create publishable material that stands on its own with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

But, there is something incredibly healing about not only finally getting the story out in all its pieces and parts and finding some wholeness in doing that, but also then reworking what’s come up and out [from] that sort of journal-writing, free-writing material—and distilling it and

crafting it and shaping it into something that can be an offering to others. Then it's a gift not only back to ourselves—which it certainly is—but possibly a gift to others.

I mean, a lot of people tell me, “I have been writing. I have hundreds of pages and I'm ready to publish it.” But, there is a difference between getting it up and out and taking that beautiful chunk of alabaster that has come out of you—out of this seismic activity at the depths of your soul—this beautiful stone that has emerged out of all of that experience, all of that suffering. Then, gazing into that stone and—with your imagination, with the fire of creativity—penetrating the invisible and seeing the sculpture—seeing the masterpiece—that lies beneath the contours of the natural stone, seeing how you can co-create with the universe something of beauty that you can offer back.

TS: Now, share with our listeners—Mirabai, if you will—the basic narrative arc of *Caravan of No Despair*—of this alabaster statue, [this] gorgeous piece of art that came from the seismic activity of your life.

MS: Well, *Caravan* is written in three parts. Those three parts only made themselves known to me after I had been writing for quite a while—writing all of these individual stories and memories.

So, Part One is actually my early life growing up in the counterculture of the late '60s and early '70s—first in New York and then in Taos, New Mexico—which is kind of a real odyssey point for hippies who are looking for an alternative lifestyle. The reason I have that whole Part One about my early life is that there were a series of really defining losses in my early life—the death of my older brother when he was ten and I was seven. He died of a brain tumor. Then the death of my first love when I was 14. Then sexual abuse by a spiritual teacher when I was 15.

There were these series of losses. I realized I couldn't write about the one major loss that this book revolves around—which is the death of my daughter Jenny when she was 14 and I was 40—unless I had created the context of a lifetime of losses that led up to Jenny's death.

So, Part One is my early life. Part Two is my life as a mother and my decision to adopt my children and [raise] them, [as well as] leaving my first marriage and parenting my kids on my own. Part Two ends with Jenny's death.

Part Three is the shortest but most potent—in many ways—part of the book. That is how I integrated this experience of the death of my child with the spiritual teachings that I had spent a lifetime in relationship with up until that point.

So, that's kind of the arc—early life, my life as a mother, and my life mourning the death of my child.

TS: Now, you mentioned, Mirabai, that when you were engaged in the writing process that you actually felt deeply all of these experiences in your life. I'm curious to know: somebody might think, "Well, is it re-traumatizing, if you will, to go back in to the loss of your brother, of your first love when you were a young person?" How do we go into these experiences such that they're growthful and not re-traumatizing?

MS: Yes. Really important question. I will not sugarcoat it—it can be re-traumatizing, yes. It's not for everyone. It's not something I would engage in without lining up your support system so that you have access to the love and care that you need as you navigate your most painful experiences through the writing process.

So, I strongly suggest—if you can—writing with at least one other person or maybe finding a small writing group that you can organize yourself of two or three or more people who write together on a regular basis and everybody's kind of in it together. Maybe not everyone will have the level of pain and trauma that they're writing about that you may be exploring. But, still, to have a group of people who are sympathetic and supportive, and are also engaged in their own excavation process of their life through writing is really helpful.

In my case, I just would try to let my loved ones know when I was in the most difficult material. The whole period when I was writing about the lead-up to Jenny's accident and the accident itself was probably the most excruciating part of the book to write. I just let the people I live with know that I was going through this and that—if I was going to behave badly—to try to give me a break and understand that I just couldn't stand it. But, I had to do it anyway.

And they did. They cooked for me and they cleaned for me, and they picked up a lot of the ordinary-life responsibilities so that I could just be in the fire. When I acted like a bitch, they forgave me because they understood what I was going through.

So, support [and] companionship in the writing. Therapy or spiritual direction. I made sure that I had a spiritual director to kind of reflect and hold me accountable for what was coming up.

Yes. It's a huge thing to do. And yet, there's something so exhilarating about it that—as I was writing and I think what a lot of people find—is that sense of, “Wow, I wish I had done this a long time ago because it is a really beautiful experience to come face-to-face with my own shattered heart, and see its beauty and its radiance.”

It was such a way for me to honor not only my child in writing about her death—which I had promised her I would do in the eulogy that I wrote for her a week after she died—but all of my loved ones. It was a way to honor them by telling their story—a very powerful ceremony, that is.

TS: My sense, Mirabai, in reading *Caravan of No Despair* was that you really didn't hold back. You really put yourself out there in a very raw and vulnerable way. You put it all out there. I'm curious what that's like for you now as people are reading the book. I mean, it's one thing to do that and put it in a drawer. It's another thing to do that and publish it.

MS: Oy vey. Yes. You know, I say almost on a daily basis, “Just kidding! I take it back. I take it all back.” And I can't take it back. It's out there now. It is terrifying.

But, I say that with a kind of wistful humor, because it is what it is. I knew what I was doing. I went into this with my eyes open. But, it's still an incredibly vulnerable feeling because I have written many books—as you know, Tami—on the mystics. [These are] either translations of the mystics or reflections and commentaries on the teachings of the mystics. It's been a really wonderful place for me to abide for the last 15 years.

Even though I've written some personal things—personal essays—and I've certainly written memoir bits in my book, *God of Love*, I've never really taken my seat in my own experience the way I have in this book. I did it all the way. I mean—

TS: You did. You have.

MS: —from sexuality through grief to—yes. I had the benefit of having some writer and editor beloveds who encouraged me right from the get-go to tell the truth—to engage in ferocious truth-telling, fearless truth-telling, and not only about experiences that involved other people, but especially about myself.

So, my one dear friend Kelly said, “Don't try to make yourself look good. If something is arising that feels scary to you—like, ‘I can't let people know that about me,’—let yourself

write that and see what it has to teach you, and whether that's something that needs to be part of your story." That permission—from the very beginning—was exactly what I needed to tell this story and write this book.

So, yes—it's raw, but it's also deeply distilled. Like, I'll take three lines to tell a story that originally might have been 10 pages, because I'm just carving and distilling. But, what doesn't go by the wayside is the part that exposes my true, vulnerable, sometimes awkward, often surprisingly—what would it be?—tender being. It's like there's a tenderness that I accessed in myself that I cherish in this book—that I wouldn't give back.

TS: Let's hear from *Caravan of No Despair*. Mirabai, if you will, can you read a section of the book for us?

MS: Yes. Thanks for asking, Tami. I think I'll start—I'll just read you the Prologue. It's a couple of pages. One . . . two . . . two and a half pages.

"This was not the way I had pictured this day.

"The first copy of my first book lay splayed on the kitchen table like a bruise. *Dark Night of the Soul*, by the sixteenth-century mystic John of the Cross—the quintessential teachings on the transformational power of radical unknowing, of sacred unraveling and holy despair. Its black and purple cover thinly shot with the possibility of dawn.

"My mother and sister taking turns thumbing through the pages and making appreciative comments while I paced. I picked it up, put it back down, and resumed my post at the window.

"Thirty minutes after the UPS truck had delivered my new book, the police pulled into my driveway. This was not a surprise. My daughter Jenny had been missing since the night before, when she tricked me and took off in my car. All night, I rose and fell on waves of turmoil and peace, fearing she would never return, certain that all would be well.

"Now, our tribe had mobilized. Mom and Amy had cleaned Jenny's messy room so that it would feel good when she came home. Friends had gathered like strands of grass and woven a basket of waiting. Others fanned out in search parties across Taos County—from the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge to the Colorado border.

“Ms. Starr.’ An impossibly young state cop stood at the door, holding a clipboard. A more-seasoned trooper stood behind him, hands clasped behind his back. ‘I’m Officer Rael, and this is Officer Pfeiffer.’

“Did you find her?’ Officer Rael took in the halo of heads that gathered around me in the doorway. Friends and family straining for news.

“Would you please step outside, ma’am?’

“Is she in trouble?’

“We need to speak to you in private,’ said the teenager in uniform.

“OK, but not without my mother.’

“Officer Rael nodded. I reached for Mom’s hand and we stepped onto the porch. The policemen got straight to the point: ‘There’s been an accident.’

“Is Jenny OK?’ I grabbed his arm. He looked down at my hand.

“Your daughter has passed away, Miss Starr.’

“Passed away? ‘How do you know it’s my daughter?’ Maybe they had confused her with some other dead girl. ‘How do you know it’s Jenny?’

“Officer Rael smiled a little. ‘The purple hair. The report you filed described her hair as curly and purple.’ He cleared his throat. ‘The victim matches this description.’

“Victim. ‘Where is she?’

“She’s been taken to the mortuary.’ He looked down at his clipboard as if he had forgotten his next line and had to consult the script. ‘Ms. Starr, we are going to need you to come and identify the body.’

“The body. ‘How did it happen?’ My voice was calm, as though I were inquiring about the final score in a soccer game. ‘Is anyone else dead?’

“She lost control speeding down the east side of US Hill, almost to the Piñasco turnoff,’ he said. ‘She was alone.’

“Alone. My baby died alone. My thighs melted and my kneecaps stopped working. I slid to the cement slab and kept going until my arms and legs were outstretched. ‘No,’ I whispered. And then I was wailing. ‘No!’

“In a dark night of the soul—as I had explained in my little book—all the ways you have been accustomed to tasting the sacred dry up and fall away. All concepts of the Holy One evaporate. You are plunged into a darkness so impenetrable that you are convinced it will never lift. You may flail about for something—anything—to prop you up, but you grasp only emptiness.

“And so, rendered reckless by despair, you let yourself fall backward into the arms of nothing. This—according to John of the Cross—is a blessing of the highest order. Tell that to the mother of a dead child.”

TS: A very potent beginning to *Caravan of No Despair*.

MS: Yes. Hard to read.

TS: You mention that, at Jenny’s eulogy, you made a promise that you would write her story. Why was that so important to you—that promise? Where did that promise come from inside you, do you think?

MS: Well, I’ve always been a writer. Writing is the way that I meet the world in my body. Jenny knew that I was a writer and she really loved my writing. In fact, I had started a novel called *My Daughters’ Mothers*. It was an autobiographical novel, and it was based on adopting my two daughters and knowing about their birth mothers—and being fascinated by these women and their stories and how they lost their babies.

So, I had been writing that book. I had it stashed in a drawer. Jenny had found it when she was around 13. I didn’t want her to find it. I wasn’t ready for her to read it because also my protagonist was kind of an edgy character.

But, she loved it. She’d obviously recognized herself—her character—and she loved the fact that I was writing about her. [She] always wanted me to finish that book.

So, that was partly where that came from—knowing how much Jenny wanted me to write about her. This time, when she died, I knew that I would eventually write about her and it would be the real Jenny, not the fictitious Jenny.

That is the ritual for me. It's a sacred ritual. It's like a shamanic practice for me—writing. And I knew that that was what I had to give to my child to honor her.

TS: So, here you have your new translation of *Dark Night of the Soul*, and this incredible loss, and we could say initiation of some type in your life—happening at the same time. I'm sure you've reflected quite a lot on this connection of timing—the timing between these two things.

Tell me more how you understand the writing of John of the Cross and *Dark Night of the Soul* and these events in your life—and the connection.

MS: At the risk of sounding grandiose, Tami, it almost feels like I was partly born to translate John of the Cross. I don't just mean my English translation of the sixteenth-century Spanish words. But, I mean *conveying* the essence of this magnificent and terrible teaching to a contemporary world that may or may not have any relationship with Christianity or even with a theistic concept of the spiritual life.

There is something universal about the teachings of *Dark Night of the Soul* as John of the Cross expresses them—that transcends religiosity completely. And yet, [it] is rooted in the experience of a mature spiritual practitioner. The dark night of the soul is a phenomenon that occurs only, it seems to me, to those who have dedicated their lives to the spiritual path—even if they haven't done it in a conscious way.

In other words, it is a symptom of the ripening of the dharma in one's life. Therefore, it's a harrowing and demanding part of the path. In a dark night of the soul experience, what happens is all the ways that we have become accustomed to experiencing the sacred or spiritual life drop into emptiness and don't do it for us anymore. All the juice goes away. All the magic evaporates. In other words, all of the motivating phenomena that kept us on the path is taken [and] stripped.

Furthermore, it's not only a matter of not being able to feel the juice anymore. The concepts—all spiritual concepts—become empty and meaningless. [This] sounds kind of like an existential crisis, but it's much, much deeper than that. It's at a ground, soul level. None of our belief systems can hold up in a dark night of the soul.

So, when Jenny died, even though I had experienced in my life many, many tastes of the emptiness on my spiritual path through deep states of meditation—where I had glimpses of the oneness of all that is—and deep tastes of that unitive experience. Fleeting, but profound. None of that came close to the experience of being hollowed out by tragedy.

It did not take me long to recognize that what I had spent all of these years trying to convey in accessible, beautiful language with *Dark Night of the Soul* text was unfolding in my own being—and I hated it. I hated it with all my might. I didn't want a spiritual experience. I wanted my baby back.

So, I don't know, Tami. I don't know why these two events coincided *to the day*. But, I'm paying attention now—14 years later—and I have been all along.

There was this horrible person at my one of my first book signings, maybe six months after Jenny died—when I was finally able to show up for a couple of events for *Dark Night of the Soul*. I had this new book out. I had to do something, but I was doing as little as possible in the world. But, I did a book signing and I had my posse. I had my support group surrounding me like a militia so that they could protect me as I exposed myself in the world when I felt so fragile.

But, one of these nasty people—like a little reptile; [a] poisonous snake—slipped in when no one was paying attention and said to me, “You know, when José Arguelles wrote his mandala book and put out this incredibly sacred teaching, his son was killed in a car accident. That was because,” this person told me, “he dared to take this esoteric knowledge and put it through his own filter and publish it. He didn't have the spiritual authority to do that. So, that's why his son died. I suggest, Mirabai, that you consider—”

TS: Oh my.

MS: “—that possibility in your case.” The next thing I knew, I had pretty much fainted in my chair. I was gasping and everything was swirling. It was a horrendous moment.

So, my friends and husband just removed her—very gently—from the premises. That was that.

But, I had to consider that, Tami. I had to consider that I dared to take this mystical masterpiece of *Dark Night of the Soul* and translate it. I know that that's not real. But, I had to consider all possibilities. That was the deepest, darkest, ugliest one.

But, I couldn't deny anything because I knew that my highest task was to be present with what is—everything; all the possibilities and all the realities—and not turn away, even though to be present with all that is was impossible.

I was doing an impossible thing, like breathing underwater as a mammal. In doing so, I discovered that I may be a mammal, but I have secret gills that are given to me precisely for such a moment—when the tidal wave comes to drown me. Lo and behold.

Rumi says, “There is a secret medicine given only to those who hurt so hard they cannot hope. The hoppers would feel slighted if they knew.” I find that that is what happens in unbearable anguish—in catastrophic loss. We are given this secret cup precisely then.

TS: Now, I want to go a little bit more into the dark night of the soul—and first make a comment, which is: Mirabai, I don’t think anyone would ever accuse you—at least, I certainly wouldn’t—of ever being anything like “arrogant.” You’re one of the most humble people that I’ve ever met—for someone of your great capacity and intelligence. So, I think of you as a very, very humble person. It’s almost one of the first words I use when I describe you to people.

So, here, part of your sense of your *raison d’être* is to help us understand the dark night of the soul in a contemporary way. So, I wanted to go into it even more in that it seems like you’re implying in your description of it that it is a requirement for the depth of the spiritual journey to flower in a person’s life. Do you think that’s true? This is a requirement?

MS: Oh, boy. I’ve never put it that way. But you’re right—I did imply that today. So, I’m going to go ahead and boldly say yes, because I know that it’s inevitable. I don’t know anyone who has gone through a lifetime of spiritual practice and spiritual life who hasn’t experienced at least some taste of a dark night of the soul, where everything became empty.

It doesn’t have to be a horrendous, harrowing, tragic event. In fact, I would be cautious about equating a personal tragedy with a dark night of the soul experience, because one is not necessary for the other.

In other words, you’re not guaranteed to have a true spiritual crisis—known as a dark night of the soul experience—just by virtue of having gone through a terrible divorce or the death of a loved one. What I have discovered is that our painful life experiences can create the experiences in which a dark night might naturally unfold. Tragedy and trauma have a similar stripping action to a dark night of the soul experience, which is a very personal, inner, often invisible spiritual crisis.

That stripping action means that we can no longer have that felt sense of connection to God, to the Holy One, to the true Self that we had before we’re emptied, we’re stripped, it’s taken from us. Moreover, we can’t make any sense of it anymore.

So, grief and loss can give us those very same feelings and experiences. They can create the same conditions in which a true dark night of the soul experience may unfold. A true dark night of the soul experience is one where we’re invited to let go and surrender completely.

John of the Cross says that when a dark night descends on our souls, we must stop engaging in our spiritual practices altogether—just lay them aside. Don't try to mend the brokenness. In fact, nothing is broken here. What's happening is that the Holy One is freeing us of ourselves—getting us out of our own way so that the Beloved can actually do her/his work deep inside us.

Our task is to just be. He uses the analogy of a master painter who sees us and says, "Tami. Mirabai. George. You are so beautiful. In fact, you're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I want to paint your portrait."

If we were wiggling around and striking new poses and saying, "How about this one, God?" the master would not be able to create her masterpiece. Our job—as the beautiful model that we are—is to be still and to just rest while the Holy One creates this act of beauty that is us.

So, I love that analogy. John of the Cross doesn't use a lot of metaphors. He's a very vertical, not-so-embodied Saint. But. that's a beautiful analogy.

So, that's what we do. We stop trying to run the show and allow ourselves to be empty.

So, grief is an opportunity for that very teaching. It's also—as you so beautifully said—an initiation. It's a fierce initiation. It's a portal of fire. And yet, it is an invitation to be transformed. "Thanks a lot. I don't care. I don't want to be transformed. I want my child to be alive!" But, there's nothing I can do about that. Therefore, I can only very quietly and tenderly say, "Yes."

Hineni in Hebrew. *Hineni*. It's what little Mary said when the angel Gabriel appeared in the Christian myth and said, "You will be quickened with the Holy Spirit," which is fire, "and you will become a vessel for the word of God in the body." She said, "*Hineni*," in Hebrew. "Here I am."

And that's all we can do.

TS: There was a section of *Caravan of No Despair* that I want to make sure that we talk about, Mirabai, because it really spoke to some of my own inquiry about what happens after someone we love dies—what happens to that being. It's a chapter that you call "Believing Everything." In that chapter, you describe five different possibilities that you've experimented with. I'll just summarize this quickly, and then we can talk about it.

You wrote, “Perhaps she was just gone. Jenny was just gone.” Then your second possibility: perhaps Jenny was a spirit now. Third possibility: her soul was doing whatever it is that souls do to let go of this life and ready themselves for a new one. Your fourth possibility: Jenny was dwelling in some kind of beautiful afterlife. Your fifth was: she lived on only in our memories.

I wanted to begin by talking about this chapter that I liked so much—”Believing Everything”—first of all, were you able to sit with all five of these possibilities and say, “OK, any one of these might be true. I don’t know, and that’s OK.”

MS: Absolutely. I was able to sit with all of them and be OK with not knowing if any of them was the ultimate truth—partly because I was trained by John of the Cross, who taught me to not know [and] who taught me to rest in radical unknowing-ness. Partly because I grew up in a Jewish family that was completely nonreligious but still conditioned by the art of questioning everything. So, I’m comfortable with inquiry.

Also, because I’ve always felt that having any kind of ultimate belief system cuts us off—cuts me off—from that which is most true. I didn’t want to put ultimate reality in a box.

Also—you know, I feel like the heart that is shattered by loss becomes capable of holding everything—including seemingly contradictory realities. That’s what I found with grieving Jenny’s death—was that I had this capacity for all of it to be true. Who was I to know that they couldn’t all be true simultaneously?

I actually still—14 years later—experience all five of those realities. I feel like Jenny is almost like an ancestor. My child has become my ancestor, in that that she is available to me for guidance. I call upon her and feel her, showing up for me in tangible ways. My whole writing and speaking career—and teaching career—[are] rooted in that partnership that I feel with Jenny.

I also feel like she got lucky, and she’s the beautiful, shining drop of water that got to merge with the boundless sea of love from which we all emerge and to which we will all return, and has blessedly lost her individuality completely—which I’m looking forward to experiencing one day.

I also feel like she may well have reincarnated [to] be on this Earth again, doing whatever is her work to do. Maybe I’ll even meet her one day.

All of this is sort of simultaneously true for me even now.

TS: Now, Mirabai, I want to talk more about this because I think this is a very brave, bold, and unusual position. I know sometimes when I have three or four—I don't know if I get to five, but whatever—different perspectives that might all be true, I feel a little crazy. Maybe I've done too many interviews for *Insights at the Edge*. I see too many possible perspectives. I feel insane!

How is it that you're OK just resting in that? I want to hear more about that and how John of the Cross helped train you in that.

MS: Well, John is all about letting go of our need for answers and remedies. It's interesting: I said that thing about Judaism having this lineage of questioning—of inquiry. There's quite a bit of evidence that John of the Cross—and Teresa of Avila, his mentor and mine—had Jewish heritage. So, there was this sort of natural—or this comfort with being OK with questioning and not always having to have answers.

But let's see: How can I explain how John of the Cross taught me to be OK? Not only do I learn from John of the Cross that it is not necessary for me to explain the universe, but that it is a great gift to relinquish all such efforts. So, what John says is that when we let ourselves down into the darkness of the dark night of the soul, what we discover is what he calls “an ineffable sweetness” that begins to bubble up from the depths of our being. That ineffable sweetness is—according to John of the Cross—the love of the Beloved, who is finally, completely available and accessible because we've stopped trying to force our spiritual lives. We've allowed ourselves to be emptied—to be naked—so that we can have a direct encounter with reality.

That's what mysticism means, right? A mystical experience is one in which we have a direct encounter with ultimate reality—with the divine, with the Beloved—unmediated through concepts, through established rituals, liturgies, and theology. It's a direct experience that can only happen when we get out of our own way.

So, a dark night of the soul experience actually reveals itself to be anything but darkness. It turns out—John of the Cross tells us—that it is an experience or an encounter with unutterable radiance—which, of course, is blinding at first. It's blinding to our old eyes [and] to the way that we are used to seeing reality—the filter, the apparatus that we use to perceive what is. When that's stripped from us in a dark night of the soul experience, then we

have this naked encounter with the light. The light will be blinding until we grow accustomed to that luminosity and begin to see truly.

It's not a path for the faint of heart. This is for sure. And yet, it's not something that we can cultivate. I mean, we can *maybe* cultivate the conditions, but we can't manufacture it. We cannot engineer a dark night of the soul experience. It's an experience of grace.

But, we can show up in such a way that—if that grace is to descend upon our souls—we can meet it. We can meet it.

TS: Now, Mirabai, at the beginning of our conversation, you talked about how *Caravan of No Despair* was actually 14 years in the making, and that in the last few years, it was finally ready to come through you as a book with humor and lightness as well as the depth of heartbreak and loss that you experienced. I'm wondering if you could talk to that person who's in a grief process right now who doesn't feel that lightness, humor, [and] that sense of resolution. They're maybe even feeling stuck in that part of the process in some way.

MS: Yes. The writing itself can be—as I said earlier—the alchemical process that transmutes that lead in your belly—of the pain of what you have experienced. It's not a requirement that you be OK in order to begin writing your story of loss and transformation. In fact, it's really unlikely that you will be.

By the way, I will never be OK with the fact that Jenny died. Every birthday is excruciating for me. Not so much the anniversary of her death, which has almost become a holy day in my life—a day of ritual and prayer and access to a numinous reality that sustains me. But, her birthdays suck because each year she's not turning another year older. Her friends, now in their [late] twenties, are having babies. Jenny's not here to have babies or to celebrate the births of theirs.

There are so many times in my life where I still hate the fact that my child is gone. Yet, I don't expect myself or anybody else to be fully resolved before engaging in the process of writing our story and allowing that writing to change us. I don't expect the writing to fix us. But, it does change us. It changed me in a radical way to write this book.

I still wake up in bad moods and I still am unskillful in relationships and I'm still a regular human being doing all the things that come with the human condition. Some things I do better than others.

But, I am changed. If I waited for some sense of completion—some perspective where I could just chuckle at it all and see that the big picture is perfect—I would never have had the incredible life experience that it was for me to write this book and share it with the world.

I tell people all the time in my teaching that we are all prophets. If we were to wait around for a time when we felt ready to step up and say yes to the prophetic task, I don't know anyone who would be being of service in this world. We would all think that we were inadequate to the task.

All prophets are reluctant prophets. All the great prophets in the mythologies of all the world's religions said some version of, "Who, me? Not me," or, "Not yet!" Or, "I'll get back to you, Lord, as soon as I have enough money in the bank and my kids aren't giving me trouble and grief."

We'll never feel ready. So, we begin exactly where we are and know that that's the holiest place we can be.

So, I encourage people to make those lists of the juiciest parts of your story—or even seemingly the most innocuous parts, but the ones that are rattling around in your mind and heart. Make that list and give yourself 15-minute increments—or something like that—to just see what comes. If it has juice and legs and life of its own, keep going.

I do a lot of my best writing on little, mini writing retreats—like going away somewhere—even if it means just renting a cheap hotel room in the next town and just giving myself three days. That's enough. Three days. This kind of writing is so intense that you could go crazy if you were doing anything more than that—unless you're around people who are taking care of you. But, to do it alone, I wouldn't recommend too much time at any one shot.

TS: Mirabai, can we conclude our conversation with hearing one more piece from *Caravan of No Despair*?

MS: All right. So, yes. I think I'll read from—this is toward the end of the book, when I'm processing my loss and integrating it. I'm talking about Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's stages of grief.

"It wasn't clinical depression. It was a full-bodied sorrow that took my breath away and dropped me into profound stillness. From this quiet space, I could hear the sound of my own heart at last—my vulnerable heart, my Big Sky heart, my wise and beautiful heart. Unable to

hold myself up any longer, I let myself down into the arms of my groundlessness—and I found refuge there.

“It was a relief to know nothing—to be simply sad. In the darkness, I could rest at last.

“Maybe this is what Saint John of the Cross was talking about—the holy, holy, holy radiance of the dark night of the soul. This is what Teresa of Avila meant when she praised the beautiful wound of longing for God.

“‘The grief you cry out from draws you toward union,’ Rumi said. ‘Your pure sadness that wants help is the secret cup.’ This could be that secret cup. I tipped my head. I drank.

“[This] is what acceptance looks like. Not like light at the end of the tunnel. Not like, ‘Everything’s going to be all right.’ It isn’t that Jenny’s death was finally OK with me and I was ready to get on with my life. It was a matter of looking loss straight in the face and not blinking. It was a taking of my own sweet self into my arms and forgiving her.

“What I accepted was that I could not have Jenny beside me in physical form. But, my love for her and the fire of missing her was our connection. She could never, ever leave me.

“I set about cultivating this new metaphysical relationship with my daughter. I circled back into every phase of the grief journey a thousand times. Each time that I returned to the garden of acceptance, the trees were taller and fruits were sweeter and new species were pushing their tender green heads up from the loam.”

TS: Mirabai Starr reading from her new book, *Caravan of No Despair: A Memoir of Loss and Transformation*. Mirabai, you have provided such an incredible function for the culture in being a translator of some of the great Spanish mystics. But, I have to say—in coming into your own voice in this memoir—I think your greatest gifts are being delivered. I’m so proud that Sounds True has published this book, *Caravan of No Despair*. I hope there’s a lot more that we can do together in the years to come.

MS: Thank you, Tami. That means so much to me. And thank you for the invitation both to write this book and to have this holy conversation.

TS: SoundsTrue.com. Many voices, one journey. Thank you for listening.