

Awakening

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On being a mystic

'The most beautiful and profound emotion we can experience is the mystical... To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty - this knowledge, this feeling, this is religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I am a devoutly religious man.'

Albert Einstein

Albert Einstein would probably not have called himself a mystic but he clearly had a significant experience of the mystical which had a profound impact on him. In a sense, all of us are mystics or 'mystics in the making' as progressive theologian, Bruce Epperly puts it. All of us have the capacity for mystical experience and most, if not all of us, will have one or more mystical encounters during the course of our lifetime though we may not always recognise them for what they are.

To be a mystic is to believe that it is possible to have direct, first-hand experience of or communion with what the philosopher, William James, called 'the More'. It is to recognise that such mystical encounters can bring us spiritual insights that transcend ordinary human knowledge and understanding. It is to long for oneness or union with this mysterious Presence which we glimpse only fleetingly along the way. It is to seek ways of awakening this mystical consciousness that we might learn to see with sacred eyes and to hear the heartbeat of the Divine within all that is.

All of the major world religions were founded by mystics - Moses, Jesus, the Buddha, Muhammad to name but a few - and all of them have their mystical traditions. The mystics among us are often the most progressive thinkers. They challenge our theologies, our doctrines and our small gods. They question our perceptions. They offer us new ways of making sense of our sacred experience. They share with us insights

and truths that our logical minds could never have discovered.

What we learn from the mystics

Mystical experience teaches us that the divine Presence that we call 'God' is not 'out there', but within and around us, permeating and enfolding all that is. It points to the sacredness of all things. It enables us to recognise that our sense of ourselves as separate beings is an illusion and that at a deeper level, we are inter-connected with everyone and everything that exists. The 14th century mystic, Julian of Norwich, called this experience our 'onedness'.

It shows us that that the world around us is more intensely real, vibrant and beautiful than our normal perception allows us to see. It teaches us that the spiritual energy that flows through all of us is present in all things, in rocks, trees, plants, the earth, the sky, the universe. It reveals to us that human existence is full of joy and meaning and that as Julian of Norwich put it, 'All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.'

Finally and most importantly, it tells us that God is love. In her book, 'Revelations of Divine Love, Julian proclaims that 'Truth sees God, and wisdom contemplates God, and from these two comes a third, a holy and wonderful delight in God, who is love.'

To be a mystic is not about living in some rarified state of being, reserved only for saints and spiritual masters. It is to awaken to the reality of the God-filled world we live in. It is to have known, however fleetingly, the embrace of Divine Love and to allow that knowing to transform our seeing, our being and our loving. As Mirabai Starr puts it, it is about entering into 'the dance of love'.

Kaitlyn Steele

Progressive voices: Mirabai Starr

Mirabai Starr is an award-winning American author who is perhaps best known for her revolutionary modern translations of the writings of such Christian mystics as St John of the Cross, St Teresa of Avila and Julian of Norwich. She is a teacher of philosophy and world religions, an internationally renowned speaker, a poet and a bereavement counsellor. She is also one of the leading voices in the emerging interspiritual movement.

Mirabai was a daughter of the anti-establishment counter-culture movement in the 1960s. She was born in New York in 1961 to Jewish parents who turned their back on institutional religion because of its patriarchal underpinnings. When she was seven years old, her parents uprooted the family from their New York home and embarked on an extended road trip. Eventually, it took them to the mountains of New Mexico where they embraced an alternative 'back to the earth' communal lifestyle in an effort to live as simply and sustainably as possible. As a teenager, Mirabai also lived and studied for a while in a spiritual community known as the Lama Foundation, an interspiritual centre in New Mexico.

Mirabai describes this ecumenical experience as formative. She talks of being exposed there 'to the heart of all faiths' and of coming to recognise the truth and beauty in all of them. It is easy to see its influence in her writings which often focus on making connections between the perennial teachings to be found in the world's major wisdom traditions. For example, in her book, 'The God of Love', she explores some of the central teachings of Christianity, Islam and Judaism in a way that emphasises what unites them rather than what divides them.

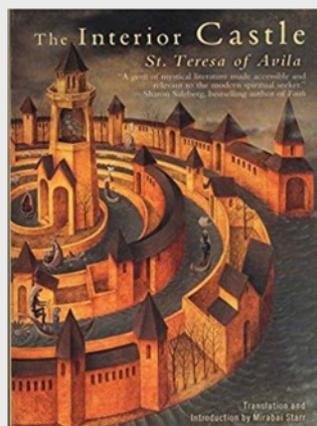
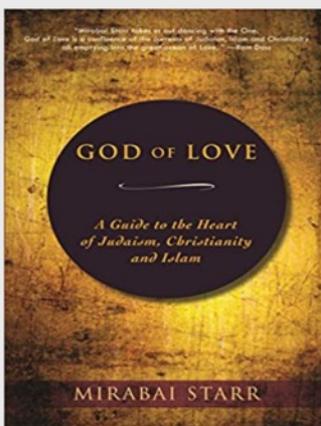
Mirabai also writes and teaches about the transformational power of grief and loss. She is no stranger to death herself. Her youngest brother died of a tumour when she was seven. Seven years later, her first love died in a car accident and tragically, her



daughter died in the same way at the age of fourteen. It happened on the day her first book 'Dark Night of the Soul' was published. In her autobiography, 'Caravan of No Despair', she describes her daughter's death as 'my most powerful catalyst for transformation, my fiercest and most compassionate teacher'. 'Tragedy and trauma', she says, 'are not guarantees for a transformational spiritual experience but they are opportunities. They are invitations to sit in the fire and allow it to transfigure us.'

Mirabai is a wonderful story teller. Her writing is passionate, moving and deeply personal. It is often lyrical and poetic in style and speaks powerfully to the heart and soul. It is, as one reviewer described 'God of Love', 'a sacred magnet, pulling on the heart of all spiritual speakers.' Her translations of classical mystical texts such as 'The Interior Castle' and 'Dark Night of the Soul' are refreshingly free from religious dogma and draw on contemporary language in a way that makes them much more accessible to modern day spiritual seekers.

Mirabai's life has been an extraordinary one and it is perhaps not surprising that she speaks to us so beautifully and movingly about the sacred mystery she calls 'the One' and reminds us that, '...beckoned with a thousand names, limited by none, the God you love is One.'



'Believe the incredible truth that the Beloved has chosen for his dwelling place the core of your own being because that is the most beautiful place in all of creation.'

Mirabai Starr

Progressive perspectives: Spiritual practice

'You create a path of your own by looking within yourself and listening to your soul, cultivating your own ways of experiencing the sacred and then practicing it. Practicing until you make it a song that sings you.'

Sue Monk Kidd

Spiritual practice has always been at the heart of the world's great religious traditions. When Buddhists meditate, when Christians take communion, when Hindus perform puja, when Jews observe Shabbat, when Muslims perform Salat, when Native Americans cleanse themselves in a Sweat Lodge, when Sufis whirl, when Taoists perform Tai Chi movements, they are engaging in spiritual practice. Furthermore, spiritual practice is not only important to those of us who are religious. It also plays an important part in the lives of those of us who are forging our paths outside the walls of organised religion, who might prefer to see ourselves as 'spiritual but not religious' or 'spiritually independent'.

From a progressive perspective, any form of intentional activity that we undertake on a regular basis and that is designed to resource us in deepening our relationship with the Divine or with our innermost self or soul is a form of spiritual practice. This includes not only traditional religious practices such as prayer and fasting but also a whole range of other activities that we might not think of as being religious or spiritual in nature. It recognises that for many of us, ordinary, everyday actions and activities such as breathing, walking, running, singing, dancing, reading, writing, creating art, making music or communing with nature can become imbued with spiritual significance and can also play a part in our search for the Divine.

Spiritual practice and 'thin places'

In his book, 'The Heart of Christianity', the progressive Christian theologian, Marcus Borg spoke of spiritual practice as 'the heart of the matter'. In other words, he saw it as central to the Christian life. For Borg, spiritual practices are essentially about 'paying attention to God'. Their central purpose, he said, is to function as 'thin places'. In Celtic spirituality, thin places are those places where the visible, material world and the spiritual



'Otherworld' meet. Thin places are 'sacraments of the sacred' to use Borg's words. In other words, they are 'a means whereby the sacred becomes present to us'.

Thin places take us into sacred space. They awaken us to the presence of the sacred both within and around us. They lift the veil between the visible and the invisible. They help us to see the world through sacred eyes and in so doing, they remind us of who we are, why we are here and what we seek. They enable us to hear 'the still, small voice' of the Divine. Thin places can of course be geographical places such as the island of Iona for Celtic Christians, the river Ganges for Hindus, Jerusalem for Jews and Christians or Mecca for Muslims. But there are many kinds of thin places and not all of them are explicitly religious. For many of us, for example, nature is a thin space as are art, music, poetry, dance and even people. Silence and solitude can be thin places too as our inner stillness takes us into an encounter with the Sacred Mystery.

Spiritual practices function in the same way. They are essentially paths to the Sacred. Their primary purpose is to take us into 'thin places', to enable us to 'touch the sacred' as psychologist, David Elkins puts it. They wake us up, draw our attention, engage our emotions and invite us to notice the presence of the Sacred within and around us. The spiritual director and teacher, Jane Vennard (2014) believes that being awake to the fullness of life, to our innermost self and to the wonder of the present moment is our essential nature. She argues that though we may sometimes resist it, there is a force within us which seeks to draw us to those spiritual practices that have the capacity to wake us up. In so doing, they help us to cross the threshold between the mundane and the sacred, the secular and the spiritual. They create a sense of entering into another dimension of being. Philip Newell, a

Teacher of Celtic spirituality, calls this 'touching the Center' or 'reaching into the Presence'.

Furthermore, spiritual practices help us to hold onto our sense of the sacred in the midst of our busy, and often stressful lives. They keep us on the path, bring us back again and again to the Way. They enable us to sustain our relationship with the Sacred in the midst of the inevitable pressures and challenges of everyday life. They also nurture and nourish us spiritually. They enliven the spirit and feed the soul in ways that often seem beyond words.

The art of spiritual practice

In his book, 'Beyond Religion', Elkins outlines a number of key points that we need to keep in mind when we are making decisions about what shape our spiritual practice should take. As he sees it, the art of spiritual practice rests on the understanding that each of us is unique and therefore has different spiritual needs and preferences. What may be right for someone else may not, therefore be right for us. It also recognises that our spiritual needs will change as we move through life and that 'While the soul always needs to be fed, the food it prefers changes over time'. It calls us to be open-minded and adventurous in searching for the food we need rather than relying only on what is familiar, conventional or traditional as the particular food our soul may need is sometimes to be found 'in strange and unlikely places.' It reminds us that it is not enough simply to 'go through the motions', that we need to approach our practice both with an open heart and a genuine intention and desire to connect deeply with the Sacred. And finally, it urges us to let our soul be the guide, to listen to her promptings, to trust her intuitive knowing and wisdom to set us on the path that is right for us.

Vennard echoes this when she urges us to ask ourselves the question 'How am I called to practice?' She encourages us to examine our spiritual practice from time to time, asking ourselves which of the practices we engage in 'deaden and diminish' us and which of them help us to 'wake up fully aware and present to life as it is'. When we find ourselves drawn to practices that are foreign to us or that seem inconsistent with the beliefs and practices of our tradition or faith community, she encourages us not to dismiss them automatically but to be willing to experiment with them and to allow our own lived experience to measure them rather than relying on that of others.

The art of spiritual practice requires, therefore, that we approach it in an open-hearted and open-minded way, that we learn to rely on the inner voice of the soul in choosing our own unique path to the Sacred, that we dismiss neither the old nor the new as we search for the 'thin places' in our everyday lives and that we commit ourselves wholeheartedly to walking our own path, wherever it may lead.

Some useful resources:

Teresa Blythe (2006) 50 Ways to Pray: Practices from many traditions and times. Abingdon Press

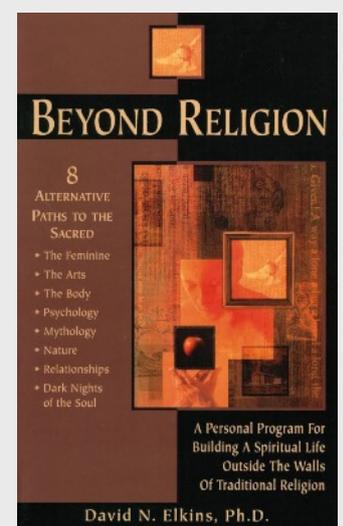
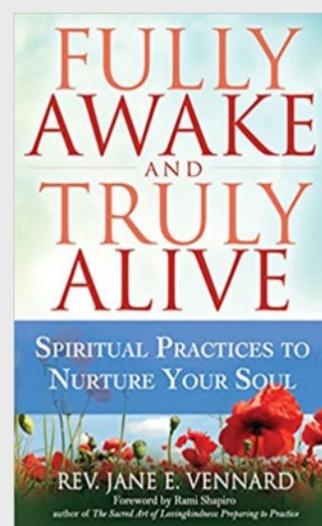
Frederick and Mary Ann Brussat (1996) Spiritual Literacy: Reading the sacred in everyday life. Simon & Schuster

David Elkins (1998) Beyond Religion: A personal program for building a spiritual life outside the walls of traditional religion. Quest Books.

Madonna Gauding (2005) The Meditation Bible: The definitive guide to meditation. Godsfield Press

Jane Vennard (2014) Fully Awake and Truly Alive: Spiritual practices to nurture your soul. Skylight Paths Publishing

Spirituality and Practice: Resources for spiritual journeys
<https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/>
A multifaith and interspiritual website with a spiritually progressive perspective.





Exploring spiritual practice:

The power of mystical experience

Spiritual experiences are glimpses of the Divine. They are encounters with 'the Otherworld' as the ancient Celts would have called it, moments of mystery that warm the heart and touch the soul and leave us hungry for 'the More' that they reveal. They are mountain top experiences that stop us in our tracks, take our breath away and stir the deepest longing and aching of our innermost being to come home. They wake us up. They remind us that there is so much more than this, something far greater and more beautiful than this everyday, mundane reality in which we live out our lives. They are unforgettable. The memory of them takes root somewhere deep within and will not let us go. They are a gift and an invitation. They come 'out of the blue', bursting into our awareness, sometimes at the most surprising times. And seconds or minutes later they are gone. We cannot make them happen. We cannot control them. We cannot hold onto them however much we may want to. And however hard we try, we will never quite find the words that would do them justice. For they are essentially beyond words.

The Greek philosopher, Plato, argued that most of the time, we see the world as if we were prisoners chained to a wall in a dark cave and only able to see the shadows that are cast by what exists around us. And so we mistake the shadows for the reality. We fail to recognise that our normal reality is but a shadow world, a pale imitation of what really exists, filtered as it is through the lens of our ordinary consciousness. When we glimpse the Divine, however, we see the light for the first time. It is like the lifting of a dense fog. Suddenly everything becomes so clear and bright, so intense and alive. And we are filled to overflowing with a joy that cannot be contained. Such experiences are written large in our sacred stories. They call for our full attention to that which they reveal. They ask to be heard and honoured as we share our journeys with each other for they have too much to teach us to remain untold. They are sacred gifts that need to be fully received rather than discounted or dismissed and if we pay attention to what they are saying to us, they can enrich our spiritual journeys and our lives immeasurably.

The philosopher, William James, spent many years investigating the nature of what he called 'mystical states of consciousness' and came to see such experiences as 'the root and centre' of all personal religious experience. They are, he said 'invasions of consciousness' in which 'the Unseen Order' breaks into our everyday lives. Others have described them as 'awakening' or 'breakthrough' experiences. Such experiences of the Divine can occur at varying times in our lives, including during childhood. While they may occur quite spontaneously, they are often triggered by specific circumstances or activities. Sometimes they happen in the midst of engaging in some form of prayer or meditation, sacred ritual or act of worship or while reading or chanting verses from sacred texts. They can also happen, however, through engaging with works of art, music, dance or drama, through being in nature or during childbirth or sexual intercourse.

In his book, 'Beyond Religion, psychologist, David Elkins argues that mystical experiences exist 'on a continuum of intensity'. They vary in intensity from low intensity 'poignant moments' such as being overcome by the wonder and beauty of nature to medium intensity 'peak experiences' which are longer-lasting and more intense to high intensity 'mystical encounters' which are very intense, powerful and overwhelming.

Poignant moments, as he sees them, are sudden moments when 'our soul is gently stirred, when the sacred brushes against us'. These are the most common sacred experiences and they generally only last for a matter of seconds. Others call them 'awakening experiences'. Experiencing a poignant moment may give us no more than a temporary sense of greater well-being or a deeper appreciation of the beauty, wonder and sacredness of life. The effects of such experiences are not likely to be long-lasting or life-changing. But they do give us a brief glimpse of the Divine Presence which touches and moves the heart and nurtures the soul.

Medium intensity peak experiences tend to last a little longer, a matter of minutes rather than seconds. They are very important to us in a way that other experiences tend not to be and they touch us at a much deeper level of our being. They are joyful, even ecstatic experiences which are often accompanied by a deep sense of well-being and of being fully alive. Anxieties, tensions, doubts and inhibitions give way to feelings of joy, peace, wonder, awe and reverence. We may become conscious of a profound sense of connectedness with all that is. We may feel enfolded in a stream of pure Love. Deep feelings of love and compassion for our fellow human beings and for the world may flow freely from the very core of our being and there is often a sense of the self expanding or of reaching beyond or transcending our limited conscious self.

High intensity mystical encounters are much less common. They are more powerful and often feel overwhelming. While they remain relatively short-lived (normally lasting no more than half an hour), such experiences are extremely intense and energising and demand our full attention and respect. We may experience them as profoundly liberating, sometimes to the point of feeling temporarily freed from the limitations of physical reality. In the most powerful experiences, it may feel as if our sense of being a separate, bounded self temporarily dissolves and we become aware of our essential 'oneness' with all that is, as Julian of Norwich described it.

'Poignant moments are the traces of the sacred that come to us on the daily breezes of life; peak experiences are the stronger aromas near the entrance to the sacred; and mystical encounters are like being inside the house, potent with the very presence of the sacred itself.'

David Elkins

Such experiences can be transformative. We may feel more deeply connected with our innermost self or soul and more integrated and powerful as a person. There may even be a sense of a new deeper self emerging, of being caught up in a process becoming the self we truly are.

Medium to high intensity mystical experiences can also have a profound impact on our spiritual journeys. They can awaken us spiritually for the first time in our lives and set into motion the search for a spiritual path or tradition in which we can feel at home. They can lead to a spiritual re-birth experience which re-energises us spiritually and confirms and deepens our commitment to a spiritual pathway we have already chosen. Or they can cause us to convert to a new spiritual pathway which we believe to be better aligned with our mystical experience.

They can also lead to a fundamental shift in the way we see, think about, name and relate to the Divine. Mystical encounters can lead to a radical change in our concept of the Divine. The God of our mystical experience may not fit with the conventional beliefs about God that we have been taught. And our trust in this new knowing - the subjective feeling of revelation, the overwhelming sense of unshakeable conviction that accompanies the experience - may be too deep for us to return to where we were before.

*'And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.'*

*Extract from 'Lines Composed a Few Miles
above Tintern Abbey' William Wordsworth*

Discovering the mystics - Julian of Norwich and the revelation of Divine Love

The mystic, Julian of Norwich, was a 14th century woman who lived as an anchoress at the Church of St. Julian in Norwich from which she took her name. Anchoresses and their male equivalent, Anchorites, lived a life of devotion and prayerful service to the community. They lived in an anchorage or cell, a sealed room adjoined to the church. Commonly the cell would have only three windows – one onto the church to observe and participate in the daily offices, one to serve as access to those seeking prayer and counsel and one through which daily needs could be attended by a servant. On entry to the cell, the anchoress would be read her last rites and the cell would be bricked up. This was a lifetime commitment; at death, inhabitants were often buried in the cell.

There are scant details of the life of Julian. Her book records that, even though a lay woman, Julian had prayed to experience the suffering of Christ. She had that life-changing encounter with God on 8th May 1373 when she was aged 30 years. During a near-death experience, probably while suffering from the bubonic plague, the priest was called to read her the last rites. As he held the crucifix in front of her, she had a series of visions or 'showings' over a period of ten hours in which she believed her beloved Lord spoke to her. She survived. It is thought that she entered her anchorage soon after this experience, devoting her life to meditate on what she had been shown and writing her book, 'A Revelation of Divine Love'.

Julian called herself 'an unlettered creature' and regarded herself as uneducated. Despite this, she was the first known English woman to write a book. Writing in English, the language of the ordinary

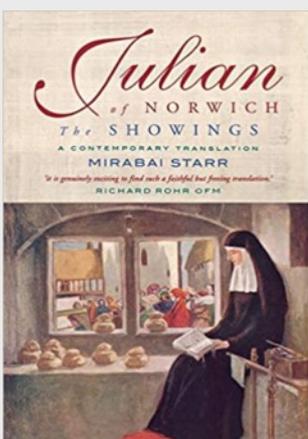


people, she believed that what she had been shown was for her fellow Christians everywhere.

However, in her patriarchal world, her message would be seen as subversive. Later, Protestants dismissed mysticism as witchcraft, religious libraries were vetted and books destroyed. The task of safeguarding her writings fell to a succession of brave nuns who copied, protected and preserved the text over 600 years. It was not until 1901 that Grace Warrack, an editor and translator from Edinburgh, sought out, translated and published the book which has now become a valued text the world over.

Although fundamentally at odds with the teaching of mother church, Julian's showings were deep and profound. She had experienced a conversation with Christ on the cross and was shown the unconditional, all-embracing love of God. She wrote that God was not angry and that sin was 'behoevly' or necessary only to draw humankind closer to Him. In a time of disease, turmoil and fear, Julian had been shown that God is love and utterly dependable. Her best known prayer of assurance still offers us hope today: 'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well'.

Meryl White



From 'Julian of Norwich. The Showings: A contemporary translation' by Mirabai Starr (2014)

'...in the depths of your darkest despair your Beloved calls to you: "Look," he says, and opens the fathomless beautiful wound of his heart so that you can peer inside. All creation is nestled there, bathed in beauty. "Do you see any sin here?" he asks. "Do you detect a shred of retribution?" You do not. All you perceive, from horizon to endless horizon, is love.'

'Everything that is has its being through the love of God.'

A review of 'Prayers of the Cosmos' by Neil Douglas-Klotz

It is quite some time since I have been this excited by a book I have come across. Once you have read 'Prayers of the Cosmos', you will never think about the Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes in quite the same way. What Douglas-Klotz offer us is an alternative version of these famous sayings based on a direct translation from the original Aramaic, the language that Jesus would have spoken most of the time.

Reading this book makes it abundantly clear just how much has been lost in the translation from Aramaic to Greek and then to modern languages. Douglas-Klotz explores each phrase of the sayings in depth, revealing as he does so the extraordinary range and depth of meaning the words convey. He draws not only on their literal meaning, but also on the deeper metaphorical and mystical layers of meaning to be found within them.

The result is, at times, stunningly beautiful and opens our eyes to the teachings of Jesus, the native Middle Eastern mystic. Douglas-Klotz's translations reveal a Jesus who thought and spoke about the nature of the universe. For example, the word 'heaven' in Aramaic actually means 'the universe' and 'blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth' can also be translated as 'soften what is rigid inside and you shall receive physical vigour and strength from the universe.' His translations also reveal a feminist Jesus. For example, when Jesus spoke of 'the kingdom', he was using an Aramaic word that is related to the Middle Eastern word for 'Great Mother' and the Aramaic version of 'Our Father which art in heaven' speaks of the 'Father-Mother of the Cosmos'.

Douglas-Klotz also offers us a number of meditations based on Jesus' sayings which he calls 'body prayers'. These are designed to encourage us to 'participate in' the sound and feeling of the Aramaic words rather than focusing the our mind's attention on determining their literal or metaphorical meaning. He calls this the mystical or universal level of interpretation, a process that involves learning 'to breathe' the Scriptures, to experience them with the heart rather than the mind.

The progressive Christian theologian, Matthew Fox, Fox begins his foreword to 'Prayers of the Cosmos' with the words, 'Reader beware: though this book is brief, it contains the seeds of a revolution.' That has been my experience too. It has given me a new set of lenses through which to view the sayings and teachings of Jesus. It has brought me so much closer to the Middle Eastern mystic and wisdom teacher whom I have been following all my life and it has introduced me to a whole new way of engaging with the sacred texts of my tradition and one that I have found both liberating and deeply moving.

Kaitlyn Steele

Other resources to draw on

<https://cac.org/love-revealed-2021-04-06/>

Love revealed: An introduction to Julian of Norwich's writings by Mirabai Starr and Richard Rohr.

Bruce Eppersly 2018 'The Mystic in You: Discovering a God-filled world.' Upper Room Books

An exploration of what it means to be a mystic and an introduction to the lives and experience of such mystics as St. Francis of Assisi, the desert mothers and fathers, Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Howard Thurman, Etty Hillesum, Rumi, and Julian of Norwich.

Steve Taylor (2010) 'Waking from Sleep' Hay House

An in-depth exploration of what Taylor calls 'awakening experiences'.

