

THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING

by Dr. Beverly Lanzetta

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Session 1: Introduction

WHAT I AM going to do is start out with a prayer. Originally, when I thought we were having a small group I had planned this as a meditative exercise so that we could actually sink into *The Cloud* together. It is actually fortuitous that we are in the dining room because I think we can do that better here. We will have periods of silence and reflection, and if you have paper and you want to take a note or write your own reflection, we're going to try to do that as the morning proceeds

I'm going to start with a prayer that I wrote to Hagia Sophia:

O Mother of Compassion

Blessed is your heart of pure love,
source of all life.

O Mother of Passion

Graced are we, enflamed by the fire
of your own desire.

O Mother of Wisdom

Radiant is your secret teaching,
known by the pure of heart.

O Mother of Sorrows

You share in every wound,
Healing every suffering and sin.

O Mother of Light

Who illuminates all realms
With inexhaustible sweetness.

Formless, Dark Mercy

Hidden is your power
of wordless bliss

You are the fountain of joy
and the breath of benevolence.

Holy Sophia, Godhead of Intimacy
Within creation You dwell,
longing for You alone.

Amen.

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Many of you know about *The Cloud of Unknowing*, written in the fourteenth century, in a monastery, we don't know exactly where, perhaps in Leeds or Nottingham, England. An unnamed monk sat down to write a guide to the interior life for a younger disciple. We do not know the name of the monk or whether or not the nameless disciple was a real person or a literary trope. The title of the work, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and the person who scribed it remain obscure, but there is no doubt that this person was a master of the spiritual life. In simple prose and elegant style, the author penned a timeless classic wrapped in Christian cloth but accessible to anyone, religious or non-religious, who yearns to follow a path toward God. That's one of the enduring things about *The Cloud*, that so many people feel drawn to it. They can enter the text and follow his guidance.

Most compelling about the work is that it provides the reader a contemplative practice that is at once simple and profound. It offers its unnamed recipient—his disciple—as it does for us today, a clear direction and goal. It illustrates the heart of the spiritual life, the emptying of self that arises through love, and the intention to pursue God as the center of one's every breath. Intended as a guide for fellow monks seeking to progress in their contemplative vocation, the author of *The Cloud* places “the sternest injunction” on his readers to learn with a full heart and to read the whole book and not just parts. Despite these warnings, *The Cloud* begins with a personal invitation to share in the Spirit's work of love.

I consider *The Cloud* to be a masterpiece of simplicity that distills a complex mystical discipline into engaging readable prose, offering the reader an advanced form of contemplation that divests the mind of all images and concepts through an encounter of what *The Cloud* calls “nothing and nowhere.” Yet what is extremely interesting about *The Cloud* is that, at the same time that the author progresses into what is called in Christianity, apophatic or negative instruction, it is counterbalanced by an even stronger emphasis on the *via amoris*, or the way of love, without which the person would lack the ability to advance in grace. In fact, it can be said that the whole of *The Cloud* is an extended treatise on contemplative love. In these realistic pages of common sense, the anonymous author also humanizes his instruction by making extensive and paradoxical use of bodily imagery, probing the relationship between physical and spiritual, and endowing the human body with a unique grace. And because of

this very practical juxtaposition that the author uses, with simple, very intense phrases and practical exercises, his method is very helpful in entering deeper into his way of love and his way of unknowing. And that's what we are going to try to practice here today.

Three themes are central to the author's instruction: the blind stirring of love; the exercise of negation or self-emptying; and the practice of contemplative prayer. So intertwined are these themes throughout the text that it is difficult to separate them, and if you've read *The Cloud*, you'll see how he keeps coming back again and again to these three interwoven themes. *The Cloud's* singular message is that the intensity of love for God is the primary catalyst of the spiritual life. It is neither sin nor fear that propels us toward contemplation, but the deep intention to love.

Thus, the spiritual path advocated by *The Cloud* moves further into disaffection and detachment from the daily issues that plague our minds and divide our hearts, encouraging readers to place these distractions under the "*cloud of forgetting*." We will be going into that more deeply later, but there he illustrates how, in the work of love, sin is destroyed, and every kind of goodness is nourished. If love is the measure, non-attachment or self-emptiness is the method by which we learn to love. *The Cloud* is explicit that only the person who has given away his or her selfish motivations, only the person who has realized the pain of knowing that he or she exists—as an entity separate from the wholeness of the Divine—will be prepared for the great work of love.

To facilitate placing our attention on God, *The Cloud* offers a practical guide to contemplation, leading us into a meditative prayer that goes beyond thought and imagery into the "*cloud of unknowing*." There are two central images in *The Cloud*: the "*cloud of forgetting*," where we put down all our distractions and our worldly concerns and self-identities, and the "*cloud of unknowing*," where we use our desire of love to pierce through the cloud where God is Mystery; God is on the other side of everything that is known. There are two tensions, or two movements, of the soul. He even instructs his disciple that he must go beyond visualizations and pious meditations on Christ into another kind of prayer, one fueled by a nameless and pure attention for reality itself. To achieve this meditative state, he instructs his disciple to recite a one-syllable prayer or sacred word such as "God" or "Love." It is this practice from *The Cloud* that informs the modern movement of centering prayer, which traces its inception to a rediscovery of *The Cloud's* timeless method.

In spending time with the text, in preparation for this talk over the last months, I started to form an image of an unnamed monk, and I began to think that he would be very happy that we have gathered today to practice the work of love. I can imagine him writing in his cell, thinking about his disciple, and hoping to offer some wisdom of enduring benefit. I think of him excavating his heart for just the right words, the simplest of words, to convey the great magnificence and grandeur of giving one's life to the holy pursuit. I imagine him in candlelight. Perhaps it's cold outside, and his hands ache from a day tilling the fields. But now he has settled into the darkness and the silence to hear the inner voice

and the wisdom he has garnered in a life of continual prayer and penance. He wants to pour out to us the essence of what he knows. He wants to guide us into the very heart of the matter, to guide us in the growth of consciousness. For our unknown monk knew the human heart. He knew that there was nothing more relevant to the contemplative person than the quest for spiritual equanimity, for a mature heart of love, for the ability to see into and through daily events to find that hidden in all things is the eternal face of God. This desire to know our source, to love and be loved, must be as ancient as civilization itself.

In the first stirring of the contemplative heart, perhaps one of our ancestors in prehistory was sitting on a mountaintop or standing by flowing water and experienced a quickening, a longing that welled up from something deep within to know what was beyond the apparent. In that birthing moment, the unfolding of our life in God was established such that all those who came after inherited an intrinsic capacity to grow into the infinite depth of divine love. For every religious world view, within its corpus of wisdom, speaks about the growth of the soul, the maturation of the inner life, and the deepening of one's capacity to love and be loved, which *The Cloud* distills in its three essential themes: the way of love (the *via amoris*), the way of emptiness, and the way of prayer.



REFLECTION:

- Take a moment to reflect on what you already know about *The Cloud of Unknowing*. If this is your first time encountering it in any way, reflect on your curiosities about it, after hearing Dr. Lanzetta's introduction.
- What comes up for you as you reflect on *The Cloud's* singular message—that the intensity of love for God is the primary catalyst of the spiritual life?
- What are some of the daily issues that “plague your mind and divide your heart”?
- Before delving into them deeply, write what comes up for you as you think about the three deep themes of *The Cloud*: the blind stirring of love; the exercise of negation or self-emptying; and the practice of contemplative prayer.



PRACTICE:

Sit, or stand, and let your body come to a deep calmness. Listen for places within that are tense and let them go. Let your mind now do the same, coming to calm stillness, listening for tension in your awareness, and emotions. Let them go, as you let your physical tension go. Feel your body and mind opening and emptying. All distractions, concerns, fears, anxieties slowly but continuously ebb out. Listen ever more deeply inside for your stillness; let your intention be in nothing more than letting go and emptying yourself. Maintain this intention for a few minutes or more, as you are able.

Meditate on the *via amoris*. Imagine in detail what the way of love would look like in your life. Write, draw, or paint what comes to mind. Revisit the practice a few times before moving onto the next session. Do details change or evolve?



PRAYER:

Enflame my soul with love's desire
I am your disciple.

—Excerpt, Beverly Lanzetta, *Canticle of Desire*



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