

THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING

by Dr. Beverly Lanzetta

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Session 2: Of and Through Love

NOW WE'RE GOING to look at the first prayer of the forward: He says, "Oh God, unto whom all hearts lie open, unto whom desire is eloquent and from whom no secret thing is hidden, purify the thoughts of my heart by the outpouring of Your Spirit that I may love you with a perfect love and praise you as you deserve. Amen."

In this opening prayer, the author of *The Cloud* tells us everything about the spiritual life that follows, and the way of growing closer to God. He doesn't question whether we can love, or whether we are made for love, but rather speaks out of and through love. This is the kernel of his understanding of the self, and of what I call mystical anthropology: that we were made in love, that our inner lives know what love is, and that we are never separated from the heart of the Divine. He shows us that by praying to be holy, we grow closer to the holy. In the remaining text of the forward, our monk also charges us with the "sternest sanctions that the bonds of love can bear" that his readers will not abuse his trust, that they will not take in a trifling way what he considers to be of great import because he wants us to move into the inmost depths of contemplation and into the mysterious action of the spirit.

Then, in the first chapter, he outlines a ladder of spiritual growth. He talks about the four progressions or four ascending phases of spiritual growth. He calls these the common, the special, the singular, and the perfect. He says that the work of God's love is so great that God is always calling us deeper and deeper into divine light, deeper into spiritual maturity and spiritual development. The first three degrees - the common, the special, and the singular - begin in this life and end in this life. But the perfect life begins here and goes on for all eternity.

The common life, as you can imagine, refers to our day-to-day activities, our social realities, our material concerns, being caught up in the demands of life itself. This common life can become a mesmerizing tonic in which we forget ourselves and the greater desires we have to live in love. But then he says that the eternal love God has for us cannot bear to let us go on living such a common life, and therefore out of his "exquisite kindness," God awakens the desire in our souls to the special manner of living, and reminds us that God called us first—that what we think is our activity is actually divine activity in us igniting our longing and our desire.

Now we move into the singular manner of living, and here we live at the deep solitary core of our

being, learning to direct our loving desire to the final and highest manner of living, which he calls perfect. The singular manner of living centers our whole life on an inner solitude, on a holy hermitage, in which you and the Divine alone share in an intimate communion. This holy hermitage, this interior solitude, is extremely important in the development and maturing of the spiritual life. It is here that we learn to give up our desires to be liked and understood, to be accepted. We give up our own will to learn to stand alone in the Divine will, to trust in the Divine call, and in a sense to become wedded to solitude as a core factor of our beings.

As we sit here now, we can actually take a meditative moment to think about pulling ourselves into the solitude of the heart, as if there is a little hermitage in the center of our being, and we can allow ourselves to sink into that hermitage where there's rest, where we are alone with The Alone even as we sit here and relate to each other. Take a moment to pull yourselves into the solitary center where, as *The Cloud* says, we deepen the inner life.

Now as we open our eyes, and just be here together, we can think about staying in our hermitage, stepping back from the distractions of the world, the things that armor our personalities, distance us from others, and block us from the vulnerability of love. We can learn to live the singular life in the core of our beings which is the deepening of the soul and the maturing of the spiritual growth of the person. And then he goes into the all the practical ways in which to do this.

The final degree is what he calls the "perfect manner of living." Here, you are never separate from God. We always dwell in the solitary core of divine love that goes on forever. We could call that divine contemplation or mystical union. We are cleaving to the Divine, never separate.

Then in Chapter 2 he writes, "Take courage, now, frail mortal though you are, try to understand yourself. Do you think you are someone special? Far from being conceited, you ought to be all the more humble . . . for he has led you to sweet meadows and nourished you with his love, strengthening you to press on so as to take possession of your inheritance in his kingdom." He sets you up, giving you these instructions, and reminds you not to give up. Don't think you can't do this, because remember what was said in the beginning: You were made of love. You were made in love. He's not telling you that you maybe can have it; he's saying this is what is; this is the way of it. Love is the deep construction of your being. You're reminded that true love is humble. In love all things are shared. Without love, we are bereft. Thus, whether a person is in the beginning stages of contemplation, has no idea what contemplation is, or is more advanced in the singular life, there is no priority of love in God's eyes.

He cautions you to practice humility and to be aware of complacency and arrogance on the path. You are reminded to understand yourself, to look into your hidden motives and feelings, and to be aware of what diverts you from a spiritual life. "I urge you, then," he says, "pursue your course relentlessly.

Attend to tomorrow and let yesterday be.” How difficult is that, to let yesterday be? “Never mind what you have gained so far. Instead reach out to what lies ahead.”

The action he is describing of contemplative receptivity is distinct from ordinary action, because it is not qualified by what we as the actor intend, but arises from the deep spark in the soul that is deeper than personality. This receptive action is an outward movement from the spiritual center, from the inner hermitage that is deeper and more hidden than the will and the often superficial fluctuations of thought and emotion. He’s saying, sink down into the hermitage, into the solitary communion with God, and from that place pull out your initial, burning longing for the Source. That’s what he’s going to go into now.

He says that most likely, we have never given ourselves over to this longing. Perhaps we didn’t know it existed. We didn’t know how to read this inner desire. Perhaps we thought this desire was for some external object: pleasure, career, fame, or even spiritual ambition, all of which are obstacles to mystical union. Now love is drawing us to another kind of longing.



REFLECTION:

- Does your day-to-day life—what the author of *The Cloud* refers to as the “common life”—ever feel like a “mesmerizing tonic” in which you forget yourself?
- Does it feel possible to enter into an inner solitude, in which you and the Divine share in an intimate communion? If so, how does that feel? If not, can you name what is preventing it?
- When you look into your hidden motives and feelings, are you aware of what diverts you from a spiritual life?
- How might it affect your prayer practice if you knew that, “by praying to be holy, we grow closer to the holy”?
- Consider that we were made in love, that our inner lives know what love is, and that we are never separated from the heart of the Divine.



PRACTICE:

Sit in meditation and imagine pulling yourself into the solitude of the heart, as if there is a little hermitage in the center of your being. Allow yourself to feel the loving peace there, where you are free of the burden of the armor you might wear in your daily life. Feel the sweetness of your vulnerability, of the loving atmosphere that resides with you always at your deepest center, your sanctuary of the heart. Once you feel you are there, “sink down into the hermitage, into the solitary communion with God, and from that place pull out your initial burning longing for the Source.” After a while, bring your awareness back to the moment and to the room you are in. As you leave the meditation, remember to keep your hermitage alive in everything you see and you do.



PRAYER:

“Oh God, unto whom all hearts lie open, unto whom desire is eloquent, and from whom no secret is hidden, purify the thoughts of my heart by the outpouring of your spirit that I may love you with perfect love and praise you as you deserve. Amen.”

—*The Cloud of Unknowing*



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