

THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING

by Dr. Beverly Lanzetta

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Session 4: Love Heals

NOT ONLY IS love an intention of the soul to return to its source, it's also a force that heals. *The Cloud* now tells us that the force of love, *via amoris*, heals the roots of sin. I'm going to read an extended piece from this because I think it's so important.

He says (Chapter 12): "Let your longing relentlessly beat upon *the cloud of unknowing* that lies between you and your God. Pierce that cloud with the keen shaft of your love, spurn the thought of anything less than God, and do not give up this work for anything. For the contemplative work of love by itself will heal you of all the roots of sin." . . . "I am trying to make clear with words what experience teaches more convincingly, that techniques and methods are ultimately useless for awakening contemplative love. It is futile to come to this work armed with them. For all good methods and means depend on it, while it alone depends on nothing." (Chapter 34)

Again, the passion, the intentionality, underlies everything, and heals everything. I think of Teilhard de Chardin when I read this. I think of love as what he called "the supreme spiritual energy." It's not what we think of as simply emotion, but it's a force, a reality that is transformative, and that causes us to leave behind all the inadequacies and sins we attribute to ourselves or that we have been taught, and to enter further into the meaning and the teaching of love. That love is profound, mature, and a force of consciousness.

He continues about the priority of love: "Fast as much as you like, watch far into the night, rise long before dawn, discipline your body, and if it were permitted—which it is not—put out your eyes, tear out your tongue, plug up your ears and nose, and cut off your limbs; yes, chastise your body with every discipline, and you would still gain nothing. The desire and tendency toward sin would remain in your (heart).

"What is more, if you wept in constant sorrow for your sins and Christ's Passion and pondered unceasingly on the joys of heaven, do you think it would do you any good? Much good, I am sure. You would profit no doubt and grow in grace but in comparison with the blind stirring of love, all of this is very little. For the contemplative work of love is the best part, belonging to Mary. The work of love not only heals the roots of sin, but nurtures practical goodness. Anything you attempt to do without this love will certainly be imperfect, for it is sure to be marred by ulterior motives."

Here again, is what I think of as an infinite benevolence. He's trying to show us a way into a maturing of the spiritual life that is now moving into benevolence, beyond anything that is harmful or punitive or sinful that we think or talk about, and is moving into the pure spiritual activity of love, which is a very deep and difficult aspect of contemplation and is not easy to do. We like to think of all the bad things we do, but it's very hard to experience our goodness, and to know that even in the midst of our sins and failures, that the goodness has always loved us. This is the stage of the spiritual life that he is taking us into now. At least, that's how I read *The Cloud*.

He says that love really means a radical, personal commitment to God. Love is a radical vow of fidelity. In this simple sentence rests an entire teaching on the meaning of fidelity in the spiritual life, and on the necessity of making one's life a vow. When you have given your whole life to the divine pursuit, you join in the great work of love. You have a contemplative heart. You have a monastic heart, whether or not you understand contemplation, or whether you live in a monastery. This is love without self-interest. This is love because we were made for love. We don't seek love for flights of transcendence or spiritual consolation, but love as an act of faith, an act of fidelity, an act of gratitude for the Mystery that made us. Teresa talks about this love, saying "The important thing now is not to think much, but to love much, and to do that which best stirs you to love."

This love that he's talking about, this fidelity, this radical commitment to God, extends beyond the personal to the whole of creation. The spiritual agony of the Earth and its people are perhaps greater than ever before. Our spiritual growth and maturity must contribute to finding a common soul for humanity, for personal and planetary transformation. Through love, through this radical vow of fidelity, we can listen more deeply for the voices of the Earth, the cry of the hungry, the plea of the homeless, and develop a new literacy of the heart; a mysticism of love that reaches out to heal and restore.

When I read *The Cloud*, I think: Love means that we are not on Earth for ourselves alone. It is incumbent upon us to realize how our actions and inactions profoundly affect our soul health, our relationship with all beings, and the complex biosphere of the Earth. We need a voice and a vision from which to awaken the soul of the world and to rescue ourselves from endangering the Spirit of life. Injustice and war strike more deeply into the sacred web of creation, generating a hopelessness and despair that wounds all our souls.

The Cloud is a very contemporary text, because if we extend this thinking into our contemporary vision I hear him saying that the integrity of our planet and the fate of the biosphere and ecosystems are dependent upon the excavation of our hearts and minds, of our souls and spirits, to discover a more generous benevolence and a sturdier vow of humility.

If we place the *via amoris*, the way of love, at the center of our hearts, we are living a religious consciousness. If we place the Earth and each of us that we know and love, and all beings, all the more-

than-human inhabitants, and consecrate our lives each day to their benefit, in love, then our daily life becomes a prayer of healing for the world.

This is how I see *The Cloud*, the intention for love moving out into the larger community. The author (Chapter 3), “And so diligently persevere until you feel joy in it. For in the beginning it is usual to feel nothings but a kind of darkness about your mind, or as it were, a *cloud of unknowing*. You will seem to know nothing and to feel nothing, except a naked intent toward God in the depths of your being. Try as you might, this darkness and this cloud will remain between you and your God.”

Chapter 9: “Therefore, firmly reject all clear ideas however pious or delightful. For I tell you this, one loving blind desire for God alone is more valuable in itself, more pleasing to God and to the saints, more beneficial to your own growth, and more helpful to your friends, both living and dead, than anything else you could do. . . . Does this surprise you? It is only because you have not experienced it for yourself.”

Now we are going to take a minute for meditation, and then we’ll take a break, and when you come back, we’ll talk about *the cloud of forgetting*. Now rest in the little hermitage in your heart and let yourself feel that blind stirring of love. Let yourself feel all the reasons why you think you can’t love, or you don’t know how to love, and push them away from your intention, push them away from that blind stirring.



REFLECTION:

- Can you envision your life as a *via amoris*—your life as a way of love?
- Can you picture love as not just a feeling, but a spiritual force?
- *The Cloud of Unknowing* here explains how even the strictest practices usually associated with religious devotions, such as fasting, physical suffering, long hours of study, are all “very little.” Instead, the “work of love is the best.” Let this idea settle in with you, live with it, explore what the work of love is. Write about it in your journal.
- “Love means we are not in Earth for ourselves.” How can your love be of benefit for others, and for the earth?



PRACTICE:

Experience your goodness. Recite a litany of your goodness.

Do the practice at the end of the audio. Sink into the little hermitage in your heart and let yourself feel that blind stirring of love. Let yourself feel all the reasons why you think you can't love, or you don't know how to love, and push them away from the blind stirring.



PRAYER:

O Glorious One, form my heart into a
bouquet of love:

May each breath be in praise of you

May each word announce your holy peace

May each action honor your hidden glory

—Excerpt, Beverly Lanzetta, *Canticle of Adoration*



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