

THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING

by Dr. Beverly Lanzetta

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Session 5: The Practice of Self-Emptying

THE CLOUD NOW expounds more deeply on the apophatic, or what we call negative theology, as necessary to experience God in God's self. Not the names for God, not our ideas about God, not how we think we know God, but the divine nature in itself. As we get into this, you will see that he talks about the sorrow of knowing that "I exist," meaning that we conceive of ourselves as separate from God and then we name God "out there." And he or she, our monk, is trying to help us understand that it is through the negation, through the letting go, that we enter into the Divine directly. Several people I spoke to told me, "I'm not sure I know what unconditional love is. I'm not sure I have ever experienced it." And what I always say is, that's where we pray. In my life I always have two main prayers: "Please show me unconditional love. Please make me empty." Pray for unconditional love, say that you don't know what it is. Pour your heart out, pour your feelings out, your lament, your joy, your grief, your despair and let that be the prayer. That is part of the blind stirring. Help me to love, show me unconditional love, help me to be empty, show me how to be nothing.

In this section, the monk exhorts us to divest the self of anything that stands in the way of our entire vulnerable intent for the Divine. This practice of self-emptying occurs at various levels: in personal relationships, in our thoughts, in our desires, in our feelings, in material and spiritual things, in good and ill situations, in God's attributes, and "about our Lady, the angels, or the saints," he writes. We have to put all of that under *the cloud of forgetting* even if it is just for a moment. Meister Eckhart says, "One moment of naughting (letting go) is worth all the aughting you will ever do."

The Cloud (Chapter 5): "Just as *the cloud of unknowing* lies above you, between you and your God, so you must fashion a *cloud of forgetting* beneath you, between you and every created thing. You are to concern yourself with no creature whether material or spiritual nor with their situation and doings whether good or ill. To put it briefly, during this work you must abandon them all beneath *the cloud of forgetting*." Now our monk makes the point that you are not going to be able to sustain *the cloud of forgetting* all day, every day, but even one moment of "naughting," of letting go, is going to have great benefit in your spiritual life. Here again is the heart of the *via amoris*. You must abandon, through *the cloud of forgetting*, all reticence, doubt, demand, fear, cowardice, and avarice, "choosing rather to love him whom I cannot know." Faith in your ability to love blindly for love's sake "is the real contemplative work. Then let your loving desire, gracious and devout, step bravely and joyfully beyond it and reach out to pierce the darkness above. Yes, beat upon that thick *cloud of unknowing* with the dart of your loving desire and do not cease come what may." (Chapter 6)

You are made in love, you are made for love, you are made to become intimate with the Divine, so don't give up. Nothing that you think is separating you from the Divine is really ultimate, is really eternal. It is only temporal, only ephemeral. And, thus, *The Cloud* is trying to help us to see that every objection we have or conjure, is simply that. It is just an objection from our personal will. It's our rejection of love. It's our rejection that we could know the Divine in its own nature. He's trying to flip around the way that we think, the way that we look at life. I like to think of it like an icon. An icon has a reverse perspective. In a regular painting, the perspective moves from an internal point out toward the observer, whereas in an icon the perspective draws the eye of the observer inward toward the Divine. Our perspective is wrong. We have to reverse our perspective. It's not that we are partial and are trying to be full. We are already full and trying to rid ourselves of our partiality.

When I think about his idea of *the cloud of forgetting*, I say to myself that the exercise is to pray that we may long to let go, we may pray that we don't know how to do it, we may pray we don't know how to get there, we may pray "show me the way," we may pray in confusion, we may pray in doubt, we may pray in grief, and we may pray in surrender. But in every way that we pray, we want to understand how to let go of all the memories and obstructions and distractions that prevent us from the naked intent toward the Divine.

The Cloud (Chapter 7): "Allow no other ideas about God to enter your mind. Yet even this is too much. A naked intent toward God, the desire for him alone, is enough." He cautions that the litany of thoughts that we harbor that seems harmless and holy, even these must be let go. *The Cloud*: "Probably you will find yourself thinking about the wonderful qualities of Jesus, his sweetness, his love, his graciousness, his mercy. Then will come ideas about his great kindness. Soon you will be thinking about your sinful life and perhaps in this connection you will recall some place where you have lived in the past, until suddenly, before you know it, your mind is completely scattered."

He's so practical because our monk knows what's going on inside of us. *The Cloud* says to help you with this, "Choose a short word rather than a long one. A one-syllable word such as 'God' or 'love' is best. But choose one that is meaningful to you. Then fix it in your mind so that it will remain there come what may. This word will be your defense in conflict and in peace. Use it to beat upon the cloud of darkness above you and to subdue all distractions, consigning them to *the cloud of forgetting* beneath you."

Now here is where I think he is so interesting and contemporary. He is not talking about a willy-nilly, blind hope. That's not *The Cloud's* energy at all. I think of it like Gandhi—active resistance, active awareness, to everything that stands in the way of non-violence and love. He is saying: Use your word, use your love to beat upon the cloud of darkness and subdue all distractions. In other words, you take an active and receptive role. It's paradox, tension. This blind desire for God is going to push away all these other distractions, which becomes the center of every deepening and spiritual growth of the

heart. It's focusing on the one thing necessary, removing all distractions. You want to know: What is the center of your life? What is the meaning of life? How can I live in that meaning? Do I dare to believe it's possible? *The Cloud* is trying to show us, yes, not only is it possible, but we have everything we need within us to make it happen. Even if we are in darkness, even if we stay in the dark night for weeks or months or years, there is still something moving in this direction.

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REFLECTION:

- Reflect on your life. How much are you “naughting” and how much are you “aughting”? Envision finding moments during the day when you can practice “divesting the self of anything that stands in the way”?
- Allow this idea to sit in you: Nothing that you think is separating you from the Divine is really ultimate or eternal. Write or draw about your response.
- What does “love blindly” mean to you? Do you have negative connotations with the term? Can you imagine a deeply positive meaning for it? What did the author mean by it?
- Can you accept that you are already full and trying to rid yourself of partiality, rather than partial and trying to become full? How does that shift in perspective feel in your body?



PRACTICE:

Using a one or two syllable word (*God* or *Love* is suggested) practice centering prayer. Sit comfortably, take a moment to settle, and close your eyes. Silently introduce the sacred word you have chosen. When you become aware of other thoughts entering your awareness, gently return to the word. At the end of your practice, remain still and silent for a few moments before returning to your day.

For more detailed instructions on the method of centering prayer as taught by Fr. Thomas Keating, [click here](#).

(also in the Virtual Library)



PRAYER:

Please show me unconditional love

Show me how to let go

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