

# THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING

by Dr. Beverly Lanzetta

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## Session 6: The Divesting of Attachments

**E**LABORATING ON THE well-known distinction between active and passive contemplation, the author wants us to track how thoughts, ideas, deeds—however clever, good, or holy—divert us from seeking the Divine. And not as God is depicted by religion or culture or thought, because he wants us to experience the Divine in its own nature, the mystical union. *The Cloud* (Chapter 11): “My purpose is to impress on you the importance of weighing your thoughts and desires as they arise, for you must learn to reject the least of them that might lead you to sin.” Here is a spiritual practice. What negative thoughts, what demeaning thoughts, what revengeful thoughts, what painful thoughts are still lurking in your consciousness, in your heart?

*The Cloud* is saying we have the capacity to actively be aware of them and actively resist them. Brooding over injustices past or present, he goes through these in different ways, which I will summarize—feelings of resentment, envy, anger, lust, pride, and other distortions of the spirit (and a chapter on the seven deadly sins). To dispel these emotions of bitterness, regret, and so forth, we must want to be a person of love. This is my meditation on what he says—that we actively want to be a person of love. Not the kind of love that is self-denying, or love that is naïve or born of avoidance or denial, but a totally aware love. A love born of a completely open heart that is able to face the depth of human behavior, our own and others, our unkindness, our ignorance, our injustice, our pain, and bear this wounding with a steady heart.

*The Cloud* instructs us to put everything under the *cloud of forgetting*, under the emptiness, to empty. It is to free our consciousness from attachments, from thought forms and emotional remembrances that prevent us from reuniting in love. From many years of being a spiritual director, I have seen that there is something deep in the human psyche that fears that if we let go of these attachments, we will lack a moral compass, we will lose our conscience, we will never repay our debt. There is something in us that actually does not want to let go, because are attached to what it means to not let go. But *The Cloud* says that it is only when we follow the way of love that we will understand how the root of sin or sorrow or despair or doubt is healed by the loving force within us. It’s not something we can understand. It is like a mystical miracle, that we are able to become empty and let go of these attachments. The only way we can arrive is by giving our hearts away and praying that we will be more and more able to put things under the *cloud of forgetting*. In fact, our monk says we must risk putting the hidden fears and hidden beliefs imprinted in us that we are not forgiven, under the *cloud of forgetting*. Put away that fear that we will never be completely whole. It is love, not punishment or contrition, that leads us to repentance, and finally, to love.

*The Cloud* even goes deeper in this divesting of attachments. Not only does he want to free us from our personal foibles, sufferings, and memories, but he wants to also free us from social, religious, and even monastic ambition or convention. The intention one needs to follow into the heart of reality requires a single-minded willingness to penetrate what has become stagnant, staid, or unloving in one's life. This means that to pierce through the *cloud of unknowing* we must leave behind conventional attitudes and behaviors and learn to stand on our own feet. Through a solitary acceptance of inner rightness—which again is the inner hermitage in your heart—and perhaps even against or contrary to community consensus and behaviors, the fire of love is activated. And he writes about how conventional behavior, conventional attitudes, and spiritual ambition are obstacles to piercing the *cloud of unknowing*.

Then the monk talks very deeply. “Every man has plenty of cause for sorrow but he alone understands the deep universal reason for sorrow who experiences *that he is*.” (Chapter 44) Only this person feels authentic sorrow who realizes not what he is but *that he is*. This is the burden of self that keeps one separate from the paradise of Divine affection. *The Cloud* has another instruction here. Probe down to the deepest point in your mind and think of yourself in a very simple, elemental way. Not your identity—I'm a male, I'm a female, I'm a teacher, etc.—but what you are. On the simplest elemental level, think only that you are as you are. “Take the gracious good God just as he is, as plain as a common poultice, and lay him to your sick self, just as you are. Or, if I may put it another way, lift up your sick self, just as you are, and let your desire reach out to touch the good, gracious God, just as he is.” (*Privy Counseling*, Chapter 2)

*The Cloud* goes on to instruct that you should choose nothing except that naked blind sense of yourself. Notice that he wants you to have a simple awareness of being, even though this awareness that you exist will bring pain and make your heart break with weeping because you experience only yourself and not God. That's what he means when he writes: “he experiences *that he is*.” In other words, when you go into the inner self and you're praying and you're thinking, it is yourself standing between you and experiencing the naked Godhead. Your heart will break with weeping because you experience only yourself and not God, your source. But you prefer the pain of grief, of being unable to break through yourself, because the suffering will set you on fire with a loving desire to experience God as God really is.

Let's take a minute to let his images sink in—putting the Divine like a poultice or a salve on the sick self, just as you are. Feel whether you are able to be receptive to the Divine. Envision just laying a nice warm poultice on yourself, letting yourself feel that longing and desire, and pain if there is pain.



### REFLECTION:

- What feelings of regret, resentment, anger, or envy have you been carrying around?
- What has become stagnant, staid, or unloving in your life?
- Ponder the “mystical miracle” that is the force of love, and how it can empty you of your attachments.
- What does it feel like to imagine yourself embodying a totally aware love?
- Consider that it is love and not punishment or contrition that leads us to repentance and, finally, to love.



### PRACTICE:

Do the practice at the end of the audio. Imagine putting the divine, like a poultice or a salve, on yourself and letting it lie there. Allow yourself to feel longing, desire, pain, or whatever arises.



### PRAYER:

I love you  
because I love you without demand or desire  
I love you for you alone  
I want nothing but you  
I love you unbounded  
with my heart bent in adoration  
I love you in emptiness when I am most nothing  
I love you in freedom  
my soul a feast of prayers.  
Amen.

—Excerpt, Beverly Lanzetta, *Canticle of Love*



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