

Sayings from *The Cloud of Unknowing*

God himself can no man think. He may well be loved, but never thought.

The two essential virtues are meekness and charity. He who might get these needeth no more for he hath all. Meekness is a true knowledge of ourselves as we are. He who knows himself truly knows God as far as that is possible in this life.

Just as the little word “fire” suddenly beats upon and jars most effectively the ears of the bystanders, it is the same with the little word [used in prayer], whether spoken or thought.. It bursts upon the ears of almighty God much more than any long psalm mumbled away in an inarticulate fashion. And this is why it is written that a short prayer pierces heaven.

Get to work quick sharp! If memories of your past actions keep coming between you and God, or any new thought or sinful impulse, you are resolutely to step over them because of your deep love for God. Try to cover them with the thick cloud of forgetting. And if it is really hard work you can use every dodge, scheme and spiritual stratagem you can find to put them away. Do everything you can to act as if you did not know that these thoughts were strongly pushing in between you and God. Try to look over their shoulders, seeking something else—which is God, shrouded in the cloud of unknowing.

Let nothing remain in your mind but a naked desire reaching out to God. Think only that God is as he is. Do not entertain any special thought of God’s nature, whether present in himself or in his activity in creation. Do not search for God by the discursive exercising of your mind; let him be, as he is. This naked intent, which is to be rooted and grounded freely in faith, will mean for your mind and emotions a bare conception and a blind awareness of your own being. It will be as if you were to say to him: That which I am, Lord, I offer to you. I do not consider any attribute of your nature, but only that you are as you are, that and no more.

For if God is your love and your intent, the choice and the ground of your heart, this is enough for you in this life; even though you never see more of him with the eye of reason all your life long. Such a blind shot with the sharp arrow of a love that longs can never miss the bull’s-eye, which is God.. Whenever reason falls short, then it is love’s pleasure to look alive and to learn to occupy itself. For by love we can find him, experience him, and reach him as he is in himself.

Not what you are, nor what you have been, does God look upon with his merciful eyes, but what you would be.

Take good, gracious God as he is, and lay him as a poultice on your sick self as you are. Or, if I may put it otherwise, begin with your disordered self and, just as you are, reach out in desire to touch good, gracious God as he is. Do this without introspection concerning yourself, without speculation concerning God.

So for the love of God be careful in this work and do not put too much strain on yourself, emotionally, beyond what you can bear. Wait upon the will of our Lord humbly and courteously and don’t grab at experience like a greedy greyhound, however hungry you are.

Humility is essentially just a true knowledge and appreciation of ourselves, as we really are. It must be obvious that anyone who can really see and experience himself as he is, is bound to be humble.

Every single rational creature has two faculties: the power of knowledge and the power of love. God is always quite unable to be comprehended by the first faculty, that of intelligence, but he is totally and perfectly comprehensible by the second, the power of love. . And this is the eternal and extraordinary miracle of love, because God will continue in this activity for ever, without ceasing.

In itself, prayer is simply a devout orientation to God himself to acquire good and remove evil.

Please note that I am not saying that when somebody is engaged in contemplation itself he will have a special interest in anybody—friend or enemy, relative or stranger. That is impossible, because everything except God is completely forgotten when this work is properly done. But I am saying that this will make the contemplative so virtuous and charitable that when he does come down to earth and talks to or prays for his fellow-Christians he can be as well-disposed to enemies as to friends, kin as to strangers. Indeed, he will sometimes incline more to his enemies than to friends! He should not, of course, ever give up contemplation entirely because that is a great sin for a contemplative, but sometimes he has to come down for a while to respond to other people’s needs, as charity demands.

But while he is occupied with his special work, he has no time to note who are friends and who are enemies, who kinsfolk and who strangers. I am not saying that he won’t sometimes—even quite often—feel more affectionate towards some people than others. That is perfectly all right and charity demands this kind of love. Christ loved John, Mary and Peter more than the others. But my argument is that while he is actually engaged in contemplation everybody is his friend because he must then experience God alone as the reason for loving, and everything must, therefore, be loved simply and purely for God’s sake as well as their own.

The Cloud of Unknowing

No one knows who the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* is. The best argument may be that of James Walsh SJ who proposes that the author may well be a Carthusian monk from a monastery in the East Midlands of England. His dialect, like that of Walter Hilton, suggests that he was a native of Nottinghamshire and could have been a member of the Beauvale Charterhouse in the mid 14th Century. He could well have been writing for a young spiritual directee.

His style is the opposite of the common approach to God through pictures, images, words, drama and sacrament. This author's way of reaching towards the Holy One is known as *apophatic*. This means leaving aside all these images and seeking to meet the unknowable God with only a naked will. (The most famous proponent of this negative way to God is St John of the Cross.) In the author's opinion *The Cloud* was not beyond the intelligence even of 'the lowliest cow.'

'We are what we love', as St Augustine says, and 'love is the set of the will towards the eternal well-being of the beloved'. So taught Donald Coggan, a past Archbishop of York. This Negative way of Incarnation is the way which emphasizes humility. To become truly humble is to be as Jesus was (Phil.2.1-11). To the degree that we come truly to know ourselves, so we come to know our Creator. It is the humility of God that is praised and sung in the Christmas Carol *Once in royal David's city*.

Setting 'a cloud of forgetting' between us and the past and 'a cloud of unknowing' between us and the future, we are making a space for God to live fully and freely in our souls and bodies, now. 'Lift up your heart to God with humble love: and mean God himself, and not what you get out of him' (*Cloud*). This approach to God is the one taken in the well-known hymn '*Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes.*'

We are bidden not to strain after God in spirit or body. He knows what we need far better than we ever can in this life. The most famous passage from *The Cloud* tells us 'God himself can no man think. He may well be loved, but never thought.'

The Dart of Longing Love Ed: Robert Llewelyn
Publ: DLT. 1983 ISBN: 0 232 51598 0

The Cloud of Unknowing Ed: James Walsh, S.J.
Publ: Paulist Press 1981 ISBN: 0 8091 2332 0

The Pursuit of Wisdom &... Ed: James Walsh, S.J.
Publ: Paulist Press 1988 ISBN: 0 8091 2972 8

The Cloud of Unknowing Ed: Halcyon Backhouse
Publ: Hodder & Stoughton 1985 ISBN: 0 340 36868 3

The Cloud of Unknowing Reflections on texts Austin Cooper
Publ: Burns & Oates 1991 ISBN: 0 86012 188 7

Our teacher is not denying the importance of reason - after all is said and done, God must be at least a reasonable God - but emphasizing that Perfect Love, which *is* God, makes himself known directly in love. As Scripture says, 'Those who live in love live in God and God lives in them.' (1 John 4.16). Love is not love without giving away of itself. In other words, love is self sacrificing - as any parent will testify. 'You are to consider yourself even more wretched and accursed, unless by grace and by direction you do all that in you lies, to live according to your calling. You are to be as meek and as loving to your spiritual spouse, that is, to almighty God, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, as he is himself. For it was his desire to humble himself, so as to be on a level with you, and out of the whole flock of his sheep, it was his will graciously to choose you to be one of his special disciples. And then he brought you into this place of pasture, where you may be fed with the sweetness of his love; all this is a pledge of your heritage, the kingdom of heaven.' *Cloud, Chapter 2*

'Every single rational creature has two faculties: the power of knowledge and the power of love. God is always quite unable to be comprehended by the first faculty, that of intelligence, but he is totally and perfectly comprehensible by the second, the power of love. Every single creature, moreover, will know him differently. Thus each loving soul on its own can, through love, know him who is wholly and incomparably more than sufficient to fulfil all human souls or angels that could possibly exist. And this is the eternal and extraordinary miracle of love, because God will continue in this activity for ever, without ceasing. Dwell on this, if you have the grace to do so, because to experience this for oneself is everlasting joy...' *Cloud, Chapter 4*

At those times in life when we feel unable to get in touch with God in any usual sense of the phrase, we may yet, with every part and particle of our being, relax and trustingly recite, as the church does at every celebration of the Eucharist, this unnamed mystic's great prayer; 'God, To whom all hearts are open, to whom all wills speak and from whom no secret is hid, I beg you so to cleanse the intent of my heart with the unutterable gift of your grace that I may perfectly love you and worthily praise you. Amen.'

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