

### *The Cloud of Unknowing*

LIFT up thine heart unto God with a meek stirring of love; and mean Himself, and none of His goods. And thereto, look the loath to think on aught but Himself. So that nought work in thy wit, nor in thy will, but only Himself. And do that in thee is to forget all the creatures that ever God made and the works of them; so that thy thought nor thy desire be not directed nor stretched to any of them, neither in general nor in special, but let them be, and take no heed to them. This is the work of the soul that most pleaseth God.

Let not, therefore, but travail therein till thou feel list [desire]. For at the first time when thou dost it, thou findest but a darkness; and as it were a cloud of unknowing, thou knowest not what, saving that thou feelest in thy will a naked intent unto God. This darkness and this cloud is, howsoever thou dost, betwixt thee and thy God, and letteth thee that thou mayest neither see Him clearly by light of understanding in thy reason, nor feel Him in sweetness of love in thine affection. And therefore shape thee to bide in this darkness as long as thou mayest, evermore crying after Him that thou lovest. For if ever thou shalt feel Him or see Him, as it may be here, it behoveth always to be in this cloud in this darkness. And if thou wilt busily travail as I bid thee, I trust in His mercy that thou shalt come thereto.

And our soul by virtue of this reforming grace is made sufficient to the full to comprehend all Him by love, the which is incomprehensible to all created knowledgeable powers, as is angel, or man's soul; I mean, by their knowing, and not by their loving. And therefore I call them in this case knowledgeable powers. But yet all reasonable creatures, angel and man, have in them each one by himself, one principal working power, the which is called a knowledgeable power, and another principal working power, the which is called a loving power. Of the which two powers, to the first, the which is a knowledgeable power, God that is the maker of them is evermore incomprehensible; and to the second, the which is the loving power, in each one diversely He is all comprehensible to the full.

And therefore take heed to this work, and to the marvellous manner of it within in thy soul. For if it be truly conceived, it is but a sudden stirring, and as it were unadvised, speedily springing unto God as a sparkle from the coal. And it is marvellous to number the stirrings that may be in one hour wrought in a soul that is disposed to this work. And yet in one stirring of all these, he may have suddenly and perfectly forgotten all created thing. But fast after each stirring, for corruption of the flesh, it falleth down again to some thought or to some done or undone deed.

AND if ever thou shalt come to this cloud and dwell and work therein as I bid thee, thou behoveth as this cloud of unknowing is above thee, betwixt thee and thy God, right so put a cloud of forgetting beneath thee; betwixt thee and all the creatures that ever be made. Thee thinketh, peradventure, that thou art full far from God because that this cloud of unknowing is betwixt thee and thy God: but surely, an it be well conceived, thou art well further from Him when thou hast no cloud of forgetting betwixt thee and all the creatures that ever be made.

BUT now thou askest me and sayest, "How shall I think on Himself, and what is He?" and to this I cannot answer thee but thus: "I wot not." For thou hast brought me with thy question into that same darkness, and into that same cloud of unknowing, that I would thou wert in thyself. For of

all other creatures and their works, yea, and of the works of God's self, may a man through grace have fullhead of knowing, and well he can think of them: but of God Himself can no man think. And therefore I would leave all that thing that I can think, and choose to my love that thing that I cannot think. By love may He be gotten and holden; but by thought never. And smite upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love.

Yea, and so holy, that what man or woman that weeneth to come to contemplation without many such sweet meditations of their own wretchedness, the passion, the kindness, and the great goodness, and the worthiness of God coming before, surely he shall err and fail of his purpose. And yet, nevertheless, it behoveth a man or a woman that hath long time been used in these meditations, nevertheless to leave them, and put them and hold them far down under the cloud of forgetting, if ever he shall pierce the cloud of unknowing betwixt him and his God.

The lower part of active life standeth in good and honest bodily works of mercy and of charity. The higher part of active life and the lower part of contemplative life lieth in goodly ghostly meditations, and busy beholding unto a man's own wretchedness with sorrow and contrition, unto the Passion of Christ and of His servants with pity and compassion, and unto the wonderful gifts, kindness, and works of God in all His creatures bodily and ghostly with thanking and praising. But the higher part of contemplation, as it may be had here, hangeth all wholly in this darkness and in this cloud of unknowing; with a loving stirring and a blind beholding unto the naked being of God Himself only.

AND, therefore, if thou wilt stand and not fall, cease never in thine intent: but beat evermore on this cloud of unknowing that is betwixt thee and thy God with a sharp dart of longing love, and loathe for to think on aught under God, and go not thence for anything that befalleth.

For one thing I tell thee, that there was never yet pure creature in this life, nor never yet shall be, so high ravished in contemplation and love of the Godhead, that there is not evermore a high and a wonderful cloud of unknowing betwixt him and his God.

Then will He sometimes peradventure send out a beam of ghostly light, piercing this cloud of unknowing that is betwixt thee and Him; and shew thee some of His privy, the which man may not, nor cannot speak. Then shalt thou feel thine affection inflamed with the fire of His love, far more than I can tell thee, or may or will at this time. For of that work, that falleth to only God, dare I not take upon me to speak with my blabbering fleshly tongue.

And therefore break down all witting and feeling of all manner of creatures; but most busily of thyself. For on the witting and the feeling of thyself hangeth witting and feeling of all other creatures; for in regard of it, all other creatures be lightly forgotten.

On this same manner ghostly it fareth within our ghostly wits, when we travail about the knowing of God Himself. For have a man never so much ghostly understanding in knowing of all made ghostly things, yet may he never by the work of his understanding come to the knowing of an unmade ghostly thing: the which is nought but God. But by the failing it may: for why, that thing that it faileth in is nothing else but only God. And therefore it was that Saint Denis said, *the most goodly knowing of God is that, the which is known by unknowing.*