

4. The Way of Love

Harry Plantinga, draft of 2025-02-07

The fruit and the end of our prayer . . . is to be oned and like to our Lord in all things. And to this meaning and for this end was all this lovely lesson showed. And he will help us, and he shall make it so, as he says himself, blessed may he be. (Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, ch. 42.)

The road of contemplative prayer leads ultimately to union with God in love. This is a mutual, self-giving love, a love that grows in width and breadth, in height and depth, clearing the way, removing obstacles, until there is nothing that separates us from God. This love is the Holy Spirit.

We began by consenting to God's presence and action within. We made space for God's presence by surrendering our selfish loves and concerns. We began to see more clearly both ourselves and God. And now we focus on the heart of the contemplative practice, the "lift up your hearts," the "sharp dart of longing love." The *aspiration*.

In centering prayer, the prayer word is a symbol of our consent to God's presence and action within. With its focus on noticing thoughts and affections and gently letting them go, centering prayer can seem as though its goal is a stillness of mind and heart. But that's not correct. We let go of our attachments and turn to God. We seek God in love. The aspiration of *The Cloud* is a yearning, a striving, a self-giving, a reaching out to God. This aspiration is usually not put into words—it's too fast for that. It takes only an instant. But if it were put into words, they might be "I give you myself—all that I am, whatever I am." And this "you" is God, immediately present in this moment.

The *Cloud* author has told us that for the time of this exercise, we should put a "cloud of forgetting" between ourselves and every other thought or affection for created things. He has told us that we can learn about God through reason, but this knowledge is indirect; we can know him directly and immediately and fully only through love. And therefore when we seek God through love we are in a "cloud of unknowing," where reason is confused or quiet. Words and concepts are silent or ignored.

And now the *Cloud* author tells us to "beat upon that cloud of unknowing," to try to pierce it with a "sharp dart of longing love." Our goal is to be in God's presence, to know him by love and by spirit, darkly, immediately, in a union of love.

This aspiration is the core of the exercise of *The Cloud*, the entryway to contemplative prayer, the part of contemplative prayer that we are capable of doing, with God's grace. The rest is purely God's work. The aspiration only takes an instant, an "atom of time," but we never cease, we never stop seeking God. And God never stops seeking us, until we are "oned and like to our Lord in all things."

Exercise for Week 4: The Dart of Love

This week's practice assumes and builds on our previous practices of consent, surrender, and awareness, emphasizing the active reaching toward God that is at the core of the prayer exercise of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. We'll practice transforming our sacred word into a "sharp dart of longing love" "beating on the cloud of unknowing" between us and God.

As before, we'll begin with lectio divina using the provided readings, followed by contemplative prayer and reflection.

1. Pray for God's presence. Pray that he would teach you to "lift up your heart"
2. Take a few minutes to read the reading for the day and reflect on it
3. Practice contemplative prayer for 30 minutes or so
4. Take the remaining time to reflect on your prayer time through journaling

For the contemplative prayer portion:

1. Begin as usual by settling into silence and turning your attention toward God
2. Let your sacred word become an expression of your heart's deep longing for God
3. When you become aware that your attention is elsewhere, gently return to your awareness of and love for God. Don't be concerned about whether you're "doing it right." Give your consent. Allow yourself to be led. Let the Holy Spirit show you how to pray. Simply return your loving attention to God and be grateful for whatever comes

Throughout the day, try to let ordinary moments become occasions for lifting your heart to God. You could

- Let your breath remind you to reach toward God in love
- Transform routine activities into expressions of love
- Practice brief aspirations—quick darts of love toward God

You may not be able to do this as much or often as you would like—be grateful for any awareness and aspiration. But remember that it's not what you feel that matters, it's your consent, your surrender, your desire to serve God, your union in love.

Journaling and Journee

Reflect on your prayer time. How did you experience the aspiration of love? What helped or hindered you from seeking God wholeheartedly? How did it feel to transform your sacred word into a dart of love? You can reflect on these questions by writing about them in a paper journal, or you can use the online interactive journal, Journee, at:

life.ccel.org/agents/bcp-4-love

