Readings for Week 4: The Way of *Love*

1. Now all rational creatures, angels and men alike, have in them, each individually, one chief working power which is called a knowing power, and another chief working power called a loving power; and of these two powers, God, who is the maker of them, is always incomprehensible to the first, the knowing power. But to the second, which is the loving power he is entirely comprehensible to each one individually; in so much that one loving soul of itself because of love, would be able to comprehend him who is entirely sufficient, and much more so, without limit, to fill all the souls of men and angels that could ever exist. This is the everlastingly wonderful miracle of love, which shall never have an end. (*Cloud of Unknowing*, ch. 4)

2. Therefore, when you set yourself to this exercise, and experience by grace that you are called by God to it, then lift up your heart to God by a humble impulse of love, and mean the God who made you and ransomed you, and has in his grace called you to this exercise. Have no other thought of God; and not even any of these thoughts unless it should please you. For a simple reaching out directly towards God is sufficient, without any other cause except himself. If you like, you can have this reaching out, wrapped up and enfolded in a single word. . . . With this word you are to beat upon this cloud and this darkness above you. With this word you are to strike down every kind of thought under the cloud of forgetting. (*Cloud*, ch. 7)

3. No words or any word can be appropriate to express this humble impulse of love by which one lifts up one's heart to God, this "simple extension of your will, reaching out to God." This is the sole activity of the mind that is proper to this exercise. The author calls it the "nakid entent," and it signifies the substance of the contemplative effort. The traditional word in the spiritual vocabulary of the West is *extension*, inherited from the Vulgate translation of the Pauline phrase in Philippians: . . . *"forgetting the things behind me, and reaching out to what lies ahead,* I press on toward the goal which is the prize of God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus." Further than this, Augustine will not hesitate to use the same word "to extend" in terms of ecstasy and assimilation: "insofar as the human spirit can reach out toward that which is eternal, . . . in that far it becomes conformed to the image of God." (James Walsh, in *The Pursuit of Wisdom and other works by the author of the Cloud of Unknowing*, Paulist Press, 1988, pp. 191-192)

4. This simple extension, freely established and grounded in true faith, must be nothing else, as regards your thinking and your feeling, except a simple thought and blind feeling of your own existence; as if you were to speak to God inwardly, with this for your meaning: "What I am, Lord, I offer to you, without looking to any quality of your being, but only that you are what you are, and nothing else." This humble darkness is to be the reflection of yourself and your entire mind. Think no further on yourself than I bid you do on your God, so as to be one with him in spirit, and this without dividing or dissipating your awareness. . . . See to it that your thought is single and undefiled; that

you yourself, unencumbered, just as you are, may be touched by grace and secretly fed in your feeling with him alone, be just as he is; remembering that this union shall be blind and incomplete, as it can only be here in this life, so that your longing desire may be always active. (*Letter of Private Direction*, I, in *The Pursuit of Wisdom*)

5. One thing I must tell you. This blind impulse of love towards God, for himself alone, this secret love beating on this cloud of unknowing, is more profitable for the salvation of your soul, more worthy in itself, more pleasing to God, and to all the saints and angels of heaven; yes and of more use to all your friends both bodily and spiritually, whether they are alive or dead. And it is better for you to experience this spiritually in your affection than it is to have the eye of your soul opened in contemplation either in seeing all the angels and saints in heaven, or in hearing all the mirth or the melody that is amongst those who are in bliss. (*Cloud of Unknowing*, ch. 9)

6. And if your wayward inquisitive rational faculties can find no nourishment for themselves in this kind of exercise, and therefore grumble all the time and bid you abandon the exercise and achieve something worthwhile in their own probing fashion, for it seems to them that what you are doing is worthless simply because they have no knowledge of it, it would please me all the more: It is a sign that this activity is worth more than their own. And why should it not please me all the more, particularly since there is nothing I can do, nothing that can be achieved by the probing rational faculties, outwardly or inwardly, that can bring me so close to God and so far from the world as would this simple, almost imperceptible experience, this offering up of the substance of my being? . . . So keep on as before, in the first point of your spirit, which is your being; and do not go back for anything at all, no matter how good or holy that thing seems to be that your rational faculties would lead you to. (*Letter of Private Direction*, II)

7. This way to God is threefold, consisting of a path of cleansing, in which the human spirit is disposed for learning true wisdom; an illuminative path, in which the pondering spirit is ignited with the fire of love; and a unitive path, in which the spirit carried aloft by God alone is led beyond every reason, knowledge, and understanding. For, when a bridge is being built, we note that the builders first construct a wooden framework, over which the solid stonework is assembled. When the structure is complete, the supporting wooden framework is removed completely. So it is with the human spirit, which, though at first imperfect in love, begins to rise to the perfection of love by meditation until, strengthened by much practice in unitive love, she is raised far beyond herself by love's fiery affections and aspirations to her Creator. Faster than can be thought, without any cogitation leading the way or keeping her company, as often as she pleases, hundreds or thousands of times, day or night, the human spirit is divinely drawn by countless yearning aspirations to possess God alone. (Hugh of Balma, *The Roads to Zion Mourn* (prologue), in *Carthusian Spirituality*, tr. Dennis Martin, Paulist Press, 1997)