Readings for Week 5: *Without Ceasing*

1. In this exercise there is no question of moderation; I would prefer that you should never leave off as long as you live. I do not say that you should persevere in it with the same vigor; for that is not possible. Sometimes sickness or other disorders of the body or soul, and many other necessities of nature, will greatly hinder you, and often pull you down from the height of this exercise. But I do say that you should always either be doing it or preparing for it, that is to say either actually or in intention. (*Cloud of Unknowing*, ch. 41)

2. For if any kind of idea of any particular thing, other than the simple substance of your being, which is your God and your goal, should come into your mind, immediately you are off course and pulled back into subtle and inquiring speculation, which dissipates and separates both yourself and your mind from yourself and God. So keep yourself recollected and undistracted as far as you can by grace and the strategy of spiritual endurance. For in this dark contemplation of the substance of your being, in which, as I have told you, you are one with God, you must do all that you have to do: eat and drink, sleep and awaken, walk and sit, speak and be silent, lie down and get up, stand and kneel, run and ride, labor and rest. Every day you must offer it up to God as the most precious offering you can make. It must take first place in your activity, whether what you are doing be styled active or contemplative. (*Private Direction*, V)

3. Although I direct you to forget everything but the feeling of the being of yourself, yet it is my wish, and it was my intention from the beginning, that you should exchange the feeling and being of yourself for the feeling and being of God. . . . But because it seemed to me that you were not yet capable of being lifted up suddenly to the spiritual feeling of the being of God because of your lack of experience in your own spiritual feeling of yourself, in order to help you climb up to it gradually I directed you to gnaw on the dark and obscure feeling of your own being unadorned until such time as you might be made ready, by spiritual perseverance in this hidden exercise, to arrive at the high awareness of God. For though at the beginning I bade you to wrap up and clothe the feeling of your God in the feeling of your own self; later on, when through perseverance you are become wiser in purity of spirit, you must strip, despoil, and utterly divest yourself of every kind of feeling of yourself, so that you can be clothed in the gracious feeling of God's own self. (*Private Direction*, VIII)

4. But where shall a soul be found, one that is so securely rooted in and founded on the faith, so utterly humbled in the annihilation of itself, so lovingly led and fed in the love of our Lord; one that has full knowledge and experience of his almighty power, his hidden wisdom, and his glorious goodness, how he is one in all, and all are in him: so much so that unless a loving soul surrenders to him all that is from him, by him, and in him, it is never truly humbled in complete reduction of self? It is only by this royal reduction of itself in true humility and the high exaltation of God, its all, in perfect charity, that the soul deserves to have God. When it is deeply immersed in God's love, fully and finally forsaking itself as nothing . . . then God's love sustains it, keeps and defends it with his power, wisdom, and goodness from all adversity, without any industry or effort, consideration, or reflection on the soul's part. (*Private Direction*, VI)

5. And this is the way in which a perfect lover behaves, wholly and entirely to despoil himself of himself to have the thing he loves, and refusing to allow himself to be clothed in anything except the thing he loves; and this is not merely for a time, but to be wrapped in it forever, in the full and final forgetfulness of self. This is a lovemaking that none can know save him that has experience of it. This is what our Lord teaches when he says: "If any man love me, let him forsake himself," as though he said: "Let him despoil himself of himself if he truly wishes to be clothed in me, who am the rich garment of everlasting love that shall never have an end." And therefore whenever you consider your spiritual exercise and see and feel that it is yourself and not God whom you are feeling, then you must sorrow in earnest and long with all your heart for the feeling of God. (*Private Direction*, XIII)

6. If it happens that this attraction that you feel in reading or in hearing about this matter is of itself so overwhelming that it goes to bed with you, gets up with you in the morning, accompanies you all day in all that you do, . . . if . . . you scarcely know what it is that alters your outlook and brings a cheerful smile to your lips; if, while it lasts, everything is a consolation and nothing can upset you; if you would run a thousand miles to have speech with someone whom you know has truly felt as you do; and if, when you get there, you have nothing to say, no matter who speaks to you, since you do not wish to speak except about that one thing; if your words are few but full of unction and fire; if one brief word of yours holds a world of wisdom but seems mere foolishness to those who have not passed beyond reason; if your silence is peaceful, your speech edifying, your prayer secret, your pride proper, your behavior modest, your laughter very soft; if your delight is like that of a child at play; if you love to be alone and sit apart, because you feel that others would hinder you, unless they did what you are doing; if you do not wish to read or listen unless it be about this one thing; then indeed [the evidence is that you are called to this work]. . . . Even though a man may not experience [all of these] at the start, it is enough to experience one or two. (*Private Direction*, XII-XIII)

7. Always, without ceasing, turn toward the naked awareness of yourself, ever offering your being to God as the most precious sacrifice you can make. But take care, as I have often said, that it is naked [unaccompanied by reasoning], unless you wish to be deceived. And if it is naked, it will be most painful for you to stay with it for any length of time at first. And the reason is, as I said before, that your natural faculties find in it no nourishment for themselves. But that is no drawback: indeed, I like it better that way. Let your faculties abstain for a while from the natural pleasure they take in their knowing. For though, as has been well said, a man naturally desires to know, it is also true that he cannot experience God by taste except through grace, no matter how much knowledge he has, natural or acquired. And therefore I ask you, seek experience rather than knowledge. For knowledge often leads us astray through pride, but humble loving awareness cannot beguile us: [knowledge puffs up, but love builds up]. (1 Cor. 8:1) (*Private Direction*, XIV)