

## The Cloud of Unknowing

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I want to preface my message with a disclaimer, like the television stations that make clear that the opinions voiced here are not necessarily those of this station. I am going to tell you about my spiritual path, but that does not mean it's necessarily right for any of you. We are all stumbling toward the light together on our own journeys, but there is something to be valued in sharing our spiritual experiences. That said, I'd like to talk a bit about questions and answers.

Living in this information age, we are accustomed to asking Alexa lots of questions and then waiting a few seconds while the computer spins and then spits out the answer. Convenient? Yes, I fear maybe a bit *too* convenient? Gets us expecting that there should be instant answers to all our questions.

Jesus had a wealth of wisdom at his command. But according to theologian Kevin Nye's New Testament research, during his ministry Jesus was asked 187 questions, directly answered only eight, and himself asked 307—often answering a question with another question. Instead of supplying answers, Jesus seemed to prefer telling parables that illuminated the question and allowed the questioner to struggle with its meaning and come to their own conclusions, so unlike Alexa, Jesus offered few instant, easy answers. So perhaps our faith shouldn't be so much about certainty, but about living with the questions.

I spent many years chasing theological questions. When I enrolled in the intense two-year disciple scripture study at my Methodist church, I thought, "Finally, I'll get some real answers!" After all, Rev. Meade was an Oxford-trained Bible scholar. So every week I went to class full of questions on the assigned readings and ready to pick his brain. But kind of like Jesus, he did not supply instant answers. He would say, "Bonnie, great question. Here are some commentaries and resources to consult. Let us all know next week what you learned!"

I can tell you that after two years of all those deep dives into scripture *and* having to *unlearn* much of what I had been taught in Sunday School, I came away pretty disillusioned with doubts galore. I could no longer recite the creeds without feeling like a hypocrite. This was not the result Rev. Meade wanted to hear from me, but he told me that anyone who was searching as I was would never lose God, and he graciously blessed my decision to move on. So I left the church and remained unchurched for years, until the day a friend invited me to attend a service at his Unitarian Universalist church. The sermon that morning revolved around this quotation from Alfred Lord Tennyson: "There is often more faith in an honest doubt than in unthinking acceptance of a conventional creed." Tears welled up as I realized that there I could sit with all my doubts and disbeliefs and still be a part of a spiritual community. There I was enriched by wisdom from many faith traditions, and I found much that spoke to me from Buddhist and Taoist teachings.

Right now Cindy is leading some of us in a study of Brian McLaren's book, *The Great Spiritual Migration*. McLaren believes that Christianity needs to make a major spiritual shift away from being defined by a set of creeds and absolute beliefs toward becoming a community of faith defined by Love. To quote McLaren, "You can have a lot of beliefs and have very little faith and you can have a lot of faith with very little in the way of beliefs." Faith becomes more of an abiding conviction and inner sense of the right path that remains open to the questions and possibilities.

I recently read a fascinating book titled *The Cloud of Unknowing*, in which the Episcopal priest Rev. Daniel London distills the writings of an anonymous fourteenth-century monk and mystic. I love the mystics, such as Meister Eckhart, St. John of the Cross, and Julian of Norwich—people who embraced the mystery and, through a contemplative life, had unmediated experiences of the God beyond knowing. This anonymous monk was part of what is known as the apophatic tradition, which means without images or concepts. London writes, "All those images and ideas and doctrines about God are good, but we must know that God can never be limited to *any* image, thought, or creed." God is way beyond all that.

There are mystics from all religions—Jewish, Sufi, Christian—and they all seem to drink from the same spiritual well, direct experience of the divine mystery. Thomas Aquinas, in his later years, had a direct experience of God one day when he was saying Mass. Afterward, he said that of all the volumes he had written about God, "All I have written is as of straw. This much is certain—whatever you say about God is more wrong than right" On the subject of God, he became silent for several years; he simply shut up.

In a more contemporary vein is my favorite spiritual author, Anne LaMott. If you've read any of her books, you know she can sound irreverent at times, but she can cut to the chase with some real spiritual gems. This Lamott quote reflects her theology: "I don't need to understand the hypostatic unity of the Trinity. I just need to turn my life over to whoever came up with redwood trees!"

That kind of sums up where I've landed in my ongoing spiritual migration. I still value the theological knowledge I have gained in following both Christian and Buddhist traditions. That knowledge has pointed me in the right direction—toward just embracing the endless Mystery that is God, that Force that came up with redwood trees. I think of God as Spirit, an abiding presence of Love and infinite energy that permeates the universe—undefinable, unfathomable, unable to be contained in any one religion, but certainly *not* unapproachable.

The anonymous fourteenth-century monk to whom I referred earlier wrote that although God can never be grasped through knowledge, God *can* be experienced through love and a contemplative life. He asks us to let go of our mental images and concepts. God is not in our heads, but waiting to meet us in our hearts. We have to let go of the distractions in our life and be like Mary of Bethany in today's scripture reading. She wanted nothing but to sit peacefully at the feet of Jesus and just take him in. She sensed that being with him at that moment was vital, and she wanted to absorb all she could of him. Nothing else mattered.

I will tell you, this contemplative life stuff does not come easy in our culture so full of distractions. It requires patience and discipline, and I am struggling with that. It requires setting aside time every day for meditation, and tapping into the spiritual force that is God, kind of like flexing your spiritual senses. We think exercising our bodies is important, so why don't we give our souls regular workouts? An important ritual of the Muslim faith is the call to prayer seven times every day. There is a good reason for this constant redirection of attention toward God throughout the day.

On hearing Nadia Bolz-Weber's sermon last month about the importance of breath, I was moved to tears, and Pastor Susie always said to pay attention to what moves you to tears, because it just might be God speaking to you. So I have been following her lead of using the word *Yahweh* as my meditation focus. The name means "I am," but *Yahweh* never had any vowels. So when you try to pronounce it, it is simply a breath, and breathing is the universal language spoken by every human being and every living thing, animal and plant. Breathing in God and exhaling his divine Love into the world is a comforting and unifying experience. I have come to love doing this. And also important is getting into the habit of opening our eyes daily to see the holy that surrounds us—not just in the beauty of nature, but in each other's eyes, in laughter and tears, in a hot cup of soup, a song, a hug, a warm blanket. It is all breathing in the divine Mystery and allowing it to envelop us, to become an innate part of who we truly are.

This is just what Jesus taught. One of the questions he *did* answer in his ministry was the lawyer's question about the greatest commandment in the Law. Jesus was quick and definitive in his answer: Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And the second is like to it, love your neighbor as yourself. In other words, totally immerse your entire being in God and the rest will follow.

Jesus's constant command was simple: "Follow me." He didn't say to build temples around the world where he could be worshiped. He didn't say to draw up a set of beliefs to which people could pledge allegiance. He didn't care about sacrifices and offerings. Over and over and over again, his answer was simply, "Follow me. Follow my example. Love God with your entire being."

So I have come to a new interpretation of that common adage, "Let go and let God." For me, it now means, "Let go of all the theology and let God—let God just be in me." I realize that I can never penetrate the cloud of unknowing where God dwells. So I strive to be more like Mary, content to sit at the feet of God and just breathe God in and breathe out love into the world as best I can—and meet the divine Mystery in my heart.