From *A Taste of Silence*, by Carl J. Arico

**The Cloud of Unknowing and Contemplation**

I have a copy of the late fourteenth-century classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, author unknown, edited by William Johnston, which I have read so many times that it has tape around it to keep it from falling apart. I don't want to part with it: it is a good friend. I am sure you have experienced this with some of your favorite books. *The Cloud* speaks strongly to the Centering Prayer practice and, like the material in chapter 2 here, grounds the practice in the Christian contemplative tradition. Basil Pennington has summarized the major themes of *The Cloud* as follows:

> If one strives to fix one's love on God while forgetting all else, which is the work of contemplation, the goodness of God will bring one to a deep experience of God.

> Even Christians called primarily to a life of active service must at times lay aside their activity and give time to meditation and communion with God.

> One must be a person of faith, sufficient faith to believe in the Divine Presence hidden beyond the cloud of unknowing.

> One must have turned from sin toward God in love, a love strong enough to make one seek God in the darkness of God's incomprehensibility, leaving behind other attractions and desires.

> It is not what you are nor what you have been that God's all-merciful eyes see, but what you desire to be.

> It is God, and God alone, who can fully satisfy the hunger and longing of our spirit which, transformed by God's redeeming grace, is enabled to embrace God by love.

I find this an excellent overview which gives the background for the following themes that I would like to develop: the use of the simple word and detachment, the loss of self, the place of Christ, and the primacy of love. For a more complete presentation I refer you to William Johnston's introduction.

**Use of the Simple Word and Detachment**

The author of *The Cloud* suggests that during prayer all thoughts, all concepts, all images must be buried beneath a "cloud of forgetting" by the use of a simple word:

> if you want to gather all your desire into one simple word that the mind can retain, choose a short word rather than a long one, a one syllable word such as God or love is best. Choose one that is meaningful to you, then fix it in your mind so that it will remain there, come what may. This word will be your defense in conflict and in peace. Use it to beat upon the
cloud of darkness about you. Subdue all distractions, consigning them to a cloud of forgetting beneath you.

It is best when this word is wholly interior without a definite thought or actual sound.

So when you pray the word, you don't think about the word and you don't think about how the word sounds. You just be present with the word.

The author makes a distinction between finding God in the "cloud of unknowing" and putting everything else into the "cloud of forgetting." Elsewhere he says:

You are to concern yourself with no creature, whether material or spiritual or with their situations or doings, whether good or ill. To put it briefly, during this work you must abandon them all beneath the cloud of forgetting.

This is truly the spirit of detachment which is called for on the contemplative spiritual journey; it is not easy, but it is not impossible with God's help:

Should some thought go on annoying you, demanding to know what you are doing, answer this with one word alone. If your mind begins to intellectualize over the meaning or connotation of this word, remind yourself that its value lies in its simplicity. Do this and I assure you these thoughts will vanish.

Why? Because you have refused to develop them, you have accepted that they will be there and then just let them go.

These are wonderful insights that will stand us in good stead with regard to Centering Prayer. As the third guideline of Centering Prayer states, "Whenever you become aware of a thought, ever so gently return to the sacred word." The insight here is the gentleness, the single word and the importance of being detached. Let me share an example: if I decide to have a conversation with one person in a room, I am letting go of every one else in the room. I will simply not be attentive toward them. I do not demand that the others leave. That would not be polite because they are part of my life. I simply carry on my conversation. That's what the sacred word does. It focuses our intention on one thing and lets everything else pass by, or sets other things aside for the time being.

The Cloud of Unknowing never explains the method of prayer in detail. Method was always taught from teacher to student. The ramifications of the method were always written. Today everyone looks forward to seeing the "how to" spelled out in detail. When you teach something new in a book, you do take a lot for granted. There is not the opportunity for questions. Let me use an example. Every time you get a cookbook, the author of the cookbook presumes you know how to use the stove. If, of course, you don't know how to turn the stove on, the cookbook is rather unimportant. You never can be sure where the reader is. That was the thinking behind the practice of not writing out the method in those days. Each person comes to a book with a certain mindset. The author cannot anticipate all the questions and all the mindsets. That is why the best way is to learn the method in a workshop or a personal presentation.
The Loss of Self or a Sense of Separation from God.

The notion of the loss of self can be described in a variety of ways:

Now we come to the difference between the contemplative work and its counterfeits, such as daydreaming and fantasizing. These originate in a curious or romantic mind, whereas the blind stirring of love springs from a sincere and humble heart.

The author is trying to answer people who say "you're just dreaming." The intention is the key item. If the intention is flowing from a curious mind, or an overly romantic idea of what resting in God is all about, then the end result will by a counterfeit, not really contemplation. But if the intention flows from a sincere and humble heart's stirring of love for God, then this is authentic. We simply want to be in the presence of God. We are not curious to get any message, or any ideas or concepts.

Now he shows the importance of being in touch with our feelings:

He alone understands the deep universal reason for sorrow who experiences that he is. Every other motive pales beside this one. He alone feels authentic sorrow who realizes not only what he is but that he is. Anyone who has not felt this should really weep for he has never experienced real sorrow.

When we experience ourselves as we are, we become aware of our creaturehood. We are not all that we should be in the eyes of God. This self-awareness is the coming to grips with our impression that we are separate from God. Most of our depression and loneliness and anger comes from our feeling that God has walked out on us. That's only an impression. God is never separate from us. But we do have a powerful collective and individual illusion that God is separate. When we experience this separateness, often called dryness, and when we interpret the dryness and sorrows and trials as God's absence, then we experience these normal emotions with exquisite intensity

The feeling is like that of being an orphan. We feel alone in a rather hostile universe. And we want someone to take care of us. Part of our journey is recognizing that inside us is this little twinge. "My heart will not rest until it rests in You." We know there is a journey; but we don't always recognize that it is a journey to nowhere. We think we have to go somewhere and be someone different than who we are. When we think that, we feel the separateness most acutely.

The loss of self can be understood best as the dying of the false self. When we experience both a hunger for completeness and the feeling of separateness, we are on the journey. The loss of self never causes a loss of identity. We become who we are called to be.
The Place of Christ

The third component is the place of Christ. We can never lose sight of Christ on this journey. An example from *The Cloud* is helpful here (p. 17, chap. 17). In the Martha and Mary story, "Mary turned to Jesus with all the love of her heart, unmoved by what she saw or heard spoken about her." Mary ignored the noise and bustle of Martha. We might say Mary was a "teflon listener," letting Martha's bustling slide right past her. She couldn't control Martha, but she was able to let her sister's comments go and prevent them from distracting her as she sat at the feet of Christ.

She sat there in perfect stillness with her heart's secret, the joyous love intent upon that cloud of unknowing between her and her God . . . for as I have said before [Cloud, p. 18] there never has been and never will be a creature so pure and so deeply immersed in the loving contemplation of God who does not approach Him in this life through that lofty marvelous cloud of unknowing.

She lets everything go. "It was in this very cloud that Mary directed the hidden yearning of her loving heart." She was with the Lord and let everything else go.

It's important not to lose sight of Christ on our journey. People have entered into the contemplative journey and felt Christ was calling them to the Godhead, beyond names, beyond terms. They assume they can bypass Christ, forget the names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and venture out into the oceanic experience of Godhead. We need a way to venture out and to get back. It is Christ who is causing this movement. Christ is our way, the truth, the light, the life, our pattern. We must never forget that it is Jesus who is our guide and companion on this journey -- he has the map:

Anyone who aspires to contemplation must cultivate study, reflection, and prayer.

The author is concerned about our being grounded. *Lectio divina* provides us with the framework for this journey. We don't just "surrender" and float into a contemplative state and stay there. The cyclic rhythm of *lectio divina* helps us to remain grounded. Jesus is our guide and the Scriptures keep us grounded on this journey. They provide the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the necessary wisdom for the process of discernment about what is happening in our lives. We need all the help we can get to come to fuller understanding and fuller responsibility.

The Primacy of Love

The last dimension is the primacy of love. The author of *The Cloud* says:

This is what you do. Lift up your heart to the Lord with a gentle stirring of love, desiring God for God's own sake, and not for God's gifts.

This is the purity of intention that is needed in order to pray with pure faith:
For in real charity, one loves God for Himself alone above every created thing. One loves fellow human beings because it is God's love.

In the contemplative world, God is loved above every creature, purely and simply for Himself. The heart of this work is a naked intent toward God for the sake of God:

Thoughts cannot comprehend God. Though we cannot know Him, we certainly can love Him. Beat upon the thick cloud of unknowing with the dart of your loving desire and do not cease, come what may.

So when we move into the prayer, it is pure love. People who love don't have a list of things to do. Just spending time with the one we love takes center stage of our attention. Early in the relationship, there is much to "do", but as the relationship matures the doing becomes secondary to the loving part of the relationship.

Married folks tell it this way: After the day's work of running, working, doing, and sharing, we are sitting next to each other enjoying each other's company. That's not the time to start reminding each other of the crack in the ceiling that needs attention. It is the time to be with one another. That also applies to God. We don't always need to remind God of all we need. The Father knows what we need before we ask. Trust Him. There is plenty of time to bring to God's attention the list of things which need to be done during the other prayer periods. Now is the time simply to be with the Lord.

What kind of love are we talking about here? The author of The Cloud continues:

So to stand firmly and avoid pitfalls, keep to the path you are on. Let your longing relentlessly beat upon the cloud of unknowing that lies between you and your God.

You cannot apprehend or conquer God through knowledge. But you can through love:

Pierce that cloud with the keen shaft of your love. Spurn the thought of anything less than God and don't give up this work for anything.

For the contemplative, the work of love by itself will eventually heal.

This is the heart of the matter. Contemplative prayer removes the roots of sin and begins a deeper healing process. We can spend our whole lives on the surface, dealing with symptoms. It's the difference between pulling a weed out by the roots and merely mowing the lawn. Even that analogy is weak because it is not our effort that removes the roots, it is the Divine Gardener.

When we enter with our intention to love and trust, we move into the presence of God in the cloud of unknowing and at the same time we are inwardly healed over and over again.
What Contemplation Is Not

I am always surprised but not amazed at how difficult it is to grasp what contemplation is. In my reading I have made a list of what various authors say that contemplation is not. I would like now to share this with you.

First, contemplation is not a relaxation exercise. We may find ourselves relaxed in doing it, but that's a side effect.

Contemplation is not a charismatic gift. Charismatic gifts are not given primarily for the good of the person but the good of the community. One charismatic gift that might help open us to the gift of contemplation is the gift of tongues. In this gift we have the ability to communicate with God in words we don't understand. So we give up the need to understand: our praise is beyond the words we usually use and know.

Contemplation is not a mystical phenomena. We are not talking about bodily ecstasies, visions, words spoken in imagination or impressed upon our spirit. In fact, most spiritual writers advise us to let those things go if we get them. They could interfere with the journey because there is always the danger of focusing too much attention on them. They're more trouble than they're worth. We may begin to rely more on the mystical phenomena than on God.

Contemplation is not a para-psychological phenomenon, such as the knowledge of things at a distance, control over bodily functions like heartbeat and breathing, levitation, and out-of-body experiences.

Contemplation is not a "spiritual high." We may not feel anything in particular, either high or low.

Contemplation is not blocking out all of reality in order to remain empty. Some people expect this, but we are not supposed to make ourselves empty We're supposed to be detached. The Spirit will do whatever needs to be done in opening us to the grace that is needed so that we may be able to let go.

Contemplation is not a rare reward for excellence or virtue This has nothing to do with our achievement or status. Its a gift. It can come to anyone.

Contemplation is not a singular mark of God's special love or approval so that we can enter into the contemplative dimension. It is an ordinary development in the life of a faithful, praying person.

Contemplation is not a luxury option in our spiritual life, it is part and parcel of the journey.

Contemplation is not a merge into a void. This is to allay the fears of those who have a smattering of knowledge about Eastern forms of meditation and believe that if we meditate too long we will lose our identity.
Contemplation is not a dissolving of our personality like a drop of water into the sea of God's being. We don't get absorbed and lose our personality.

Contemplation is not detaching our soul from our body so that we might have an altered state of consciousness.

Contemplation is not higher consciousness.

Contemplation is not the absence of pain or the absence of desire.

Contemplation is not self-knowledge.

Contemplation is not a state of God-like goodness.

Well, then, what is contemplation? Father Thomas Keating puts it simply and authoritatively: "Contemplative prayer is a process of interior transformation. A conversation initiated by God, and leading, if we consent, to divine union."

So then what is Centering Prayer? "Centering Prayer is a method designed to facilitate the development of contemplative prayer by preparing our faculties to cooperate with this gift."