“You see life as a journey with God, but I see it as a conflict, a wrestling with God,” my friend Tjaard Hommes once said to me. He was right. I do see life as a journey with God in time. To see it as a conflict, a wrestling with God, like Jacob wrestling with the angel (Genesis 32:24–30), is to see the relation as one of facing God. To see it as a journey with God in time is to see it as one of being with God. Human relations can be seen in both of these ways, as facing one another and as being with one another. The human relation with God then has this double possibility, but in relating with God we are relating with the unknown.

There is a cloud of unknowing that comes between us and God, according to the anonymous author of the mystical Cloud of Unknowing. But the full title of his work in Middle English was “a book of contemplation, the which is called The Cloud of Unknowing, in the which a soul is oned with God.” Thus it is not an agnostic but a mystical essay, if we understand mysticism to be...
union or communion with ultimate reality. How, though, is a soul one with God in a cloud of unknowing? Apparently by way of love, “into the darkness with love.” “Love shone through the cloud which came between the Lover and the Beloved,” Ramón Llull says, “and made it as bright and resplendent as is the moon by night, as the day star at dawn, the sun at midday, the understanding in the will; and through that bright cloud the Lover and the Beloved held converse.”

Thus I am calling this book *Dark Light of Love*. If we think of knowing as taking things in and loving as going out to things, things past, things present, and things to come, there is a circle, loving leading to knowing and knowing to loving. Love is joy at the thought of the loved one, and love of God is joy at the thought of God, as Spinoza says, and I will give it a Christian turn and say love is joy at the thought of “God with us” (Matthew 1:23), for “God with us” speaks to the deep loneliness of the human condition. If the “dark light of love,” as I am calling it, is the dark light of joy at the thought of “God with us,” we can have a personal relation with the unknown, we can be friends of God, even lovers of God.

There are two clouds in *The Cloud of Unknowing*: there is a cloud of unknowing that comes between us and God, and there is a cloud of forgetting that comes between us and all else.

*A Cloud of Unknowing between Us and God*

If my life is a journey with God in time, I am led by the dark light of love, as in Newman’s lines “Lead, Kindly Light”:

Lead, kindly light
Amid the encircling gloom
Lead thou me on!
The night is dark,
And I am far from home—
Lead thou me on!
Keep thou my feet;
I do not ask to see
The distant scene—
One step enough for me.

Darkness is the metaphor here for unknowing and the unknown. Dark light is like physical light traveling through the darkness of outer space, invisible until it strikes an object, as Arthur Zajonc says in *Catching the Light*. The dark light of love then is the kindly light that leads by the heart, one step at a time. “God is spirit” (John 4:24), and so God acts spiritually, kindling hearts and illumining minds. “The heart has its reasons that reason does not know,” as Pascal says, but these reasons of the heart can become known to the mind. That is insight, I want to say, when reasons of the heart become known to the mind. Thus the kindling of the heart leads to the illumining of the mind.

Joy as a guiding principle, as in the autobiography of C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, arises out of the kindling of the heart and the illumining of the mind. It is a guiding principle in our dealings with the unknown and our unknowing. This path of joy contrasts with a spirituality of fear, an alternative way of dealing with the unknown. If I follow the path of joy, I am on a quest of understanding rather than a quest of certainty. A path of joy rather than of fear, a quest of understanding rather than of certainty, that I believe is what leads to being oned with God in a cloud of unknowing.

We must look closely, therefore, at the contrast between a path of joy and a spirituality of fear, between a quest of understanding and a quest of certainty. Letting go of fear means letting go of certainty also in faith seeking understanding. Love is letting go of fear; understanding is letting go of certainty. “Music
must be treated as all things that are eternal, such as love and understanding,” a Chinese grandmother said to one of my students, “because it is these things that will carry us through the darkness of our lives and the death of our bodies to the moon of everlasting peace.”

Love and understanding, as she said, are things that are eternal in our lives. The connection between them and joy appears in *Five Mystical Songs* by George Herbert set to music by Vaughan Williams:

Come my joy, my love, my heart,
Such a joy as none can move,
Such a love as none can part,
Such a heart as joys in love.

Love of God thus is joy at the thought of God, and the thought of God is an understanding of our relation with God. It means we are not alone. Seeing my life as a journey with God in time, therefore, I find joy in the thought of walking with God and hope, as in the words “And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him” (Genesis 5:24).

So love and understanding are things that are eternal in our lives, an answer to the problem of death, “If I must die someday, what can I do to fulfill my desire to live?” To say love and understanding are things that are eternal, and music too, according to the Chinese grandmother, is to say “it is these things that will carry us through the darkness of our lives and the death of our bodies to the moon of everlasting peace.” We can readily see how love and understanding and music too can carry us through the darkness of our lives. This is the “dark light,” as we are calling it, of love and understanding and music. But can it carry us through the death of our bodies to everlasting peace?

“Dark light” of love and understanding can bring us to inner peace in this life inasmuch as love is letting go of fear, and under-
standing is letting go of certainty. For faith seeking understanding the inner life becomes the afterlife, the inner peace becomes the everlasting peace. I wrote a poem called “Dark Light” and set it to music:

Why is it dark at night?
— a thousand stars
are like a thousand suns!
Why is it dark before me,
If your light
Shines on my path?
I can know more
Than I can tell
Of light and darkness,
For if your eyes open,
There is light,
If your eyes close,
Then there is dark,
But light inside my heart.11

The “light inside my heart” is the light of the inner life that becomes the afterlife. It is the inner peace that becomes the everlasting peace.

“Faith is seeing light with your heart when all your eyes see is darkness.” I have not been able to find the source of that saying, but it sounds close to Pascal’s saying that faith is “God sensible to the heart.”12 God is sensible, that is perceptible, to the heart, in our experience of the heart being kindled and the mind illumined. Actual grace, I take it, is that experience of the kindling of the heart and the illumining of the mind.

“If something happens to you, it is merely an event,” Irving Howe says, “but if you ponder it, and absorb it into your consciousness, it becomes an experience.”13 The kindling of the heart and the illumining of the mind becomes an experience if we
ponder it and absorb it into our consciousness. Thus “God sensible to the heart” becomes an experience. I think of the words of M. L. Haskins quoted by King George VI in his Christmas message of 1939:

“And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:
Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.
And he replied: Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.”

“Dark light” comes therefore of going out into the darkness and putting your hand into the hand of God. It is better than bright light and safer than a known way.

Seeing my life as a journey with God in time means just that, going out into the darkness and putting my hand into the hand of God. I think of *The Songlines* by Bruce Chatwin about the pathways of aboriginal peoples across the continent of Australia. A journey with God in time is like following these invisible pathways. There is love and understanding and music. The love is the joy of being with God on the journey; the understanding is of the direction this gives to one’s energy; and the music is in song as “the leap of mind in the eternal breaking out into sound.”

Faith seeking understanding is what underlies this love and joy, this understanding, and this leap of mind in song. I think of Karl Barth’s interpretation of Anselm’s argument for the existence of God. It is not an argument from pure reason, Barth says, but from faith seeking understanding. What it gives, then, is an understanding of faith. Faith seeking understanding, we could say, underlies the thought of a journey with God in time. It underlies the thought that we are not alone and thus the leap of mind in song.

“We are alone, and we cannot make one another unalone,” a friend of mine used to say. If our life is a journey with God in
time, however, we are not alone. It is true, nevertheless, that we cannot make one another unalone. “Only God enters into the soul,” Saint Thomas Aquinas says, quoting an ancient theological axiom. If our relation with God and with others is one of being with on our journey in time rather than one of facing, though, there can be a harmony between our human relations and our relation with God. As the composer John Adams says, “the secret of grace is harmony.”

Harmony between our human relations and our relation with God in being with, and dissonance in the relation of facing, leads us into “the cloud of unknowing in the which a soul is oned with God.” Atonement, understood as at-onement, goes with the thought of being with in our relation with God, but understood as substitution, “the substitutionary atonement,” it goes with the thought of facing. If “the secret of grace is harmony,” grace is found in atonement as at-onement where “a soul is oned with God.”

Our relation with God, and our relation with Christ, is different in atonement as at-onement and in atonement as substitution. Christ takes our place in substitutionary atonement, but we take his place in atonement as at-onement. Making his God our God, as in the words to Mary Magdalene, “my Father and your Father, my God and your God” (John 20:17), goes with us taking his place. So it is too with what Albert Schweitzer calls “the mysticism of Paul the Apostle,” where Christ lives in us and we live in him.

Our relation with one another too is different in atonement as at-onement and in atonement as substitution. It is I and thou in atonement as at-onement, and it is I and it in atonement as substitution, as in the question “Are you saved?” Harmony between our human relations and our relation with God in our being with others and our being with God on a journey in time seems implied in the classical motto Et in Arcadia ego, “And I too in Arcadia,” a tomb inscription and also the motto of Goethe’s

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Italian Journey.21 Making it the motto of my own Italian journey, my six years in Italy, I think of my whole life as a journey of this kind in time.

Keeping a log, like a ship’s log, of my journey in time, I feel I am on a voyage like The Voyage of Life painted by Thomas Cole (1842), through childhood, youth, adulthood, and old age. An unknowing surrounds the transcendent element at each stage. If I see my life as a journey with God in time, there is indeed a transcendent element at each stage on life’s way. There is an element of mystery, as I cannot leap over my own shadow. This element of mystery points to the possibility of eternal life.

A cloud of unknowing thus comes between me and God, the mystery I am to myself, unable to leap over my own shadow, the mystery God is therefore to me, as in the prayer of Augustine’s Soliloquies, “May I know me! May I know thee!”22 It is the mystery of I and thou with God. It points to the possibility of eternal life in that it is a relationship with the eternal thou. In Christian belief eternal life appears in the more comprehensive formula I in them, and thou in me (John 17:23), Christ in us who follow him, and God in Christ. If I make the God of Jesus my God, if I make his Abba my Abba, then he lives in me and I in him, an everlasting life.

Is it everlasting? I make his Abba my Abba, but what I experience is my own prayer, calling on his Abba, “Our Father . . . .” I am turning the truth of my life into prayer, like Augustine or like Goethe turning the truth of his life into poetry. To go on from there is what George MacDonald calls “proving the unseen.”23 What “proving” means here is experiencing. It is “God sensible to the heart,” as Pascal says, God perceptible to the heart in the kindling of the heart and the illumining of the mind that takes place in prayer. It is the substance and the evidence of eternal life, as in the words “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

“Short prayer penetrates heaven” it is said in The Cloud of Unknowing.24 Prayer penetrates the cloud of unknowing that
comes between us and God, particularly short prayer like “May I know me! May I know thee!” Sustained prayer also penetrates heaven, like the sustained prayer of Augustine’s *Confessions* echoing the Psalms. Still, the moments of short prayer where there is greater intensity penetrates heaven, it seems, even in the midst of sustained prayer, as when Augustine exclaims “Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new, late have I loved you!”25 It is the same in song, as in Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms* (1930), for instance at the words *Laudate!* and *Alleluia!*

Recovering from surgery for lung cancer, I woke up in Intensive Care, and I found my mind going in circles, but I found I could pray, short prayer like “Help!” Afterward I composed a song and set it to music:

Short prayer  
Penetrates heaven,  
Like Help!  
Like Thanks!  
Like Yes!  
May I know me!  
May I know thee!  
Everything  
Is in your hands!  
Guard me  
And guide me!  
Your will is our peace.

*A Cloud of Forgetting between Us and All Else*

If love is letting go of fear, it is also letting go of sadness, and this letting go is a kind of forgetting. When I was at Manaus on the Amazon, studying the little wedding chapel called The Church of the Poor Devil, I asked the Mother Superior of the Sisters I was
staying with, “Are these people really as happy as they seem?” And she replied, “They can be sad for a day. But they can’t hold on to sadness.” I thought to myself then, “Now I understand the Cloud of Forgetting—it is not literal forgetting but letting go of sadness.”

Also I came across words of Ramón Llull about remembering and forgetting. “He who truly remembers my Beloved, in remembering Him forgets all things around,” Llull says; “and he who forgets all things in remembering my Beloved, is defended by Him from all harm, and receives a part in all His blessings.”

Attention is what he is talking about in remembering and forgetting. If my attention is focused on Christ or on God, then it is not focused on all things around. So in that way I am remembering Christ or remembering God and forgetting all things around. Here again it is not literal forgetting.

I think of Malebranche’s saying, “Attention is the natural prayer of the soul.” Letting go of fear and sadness seems to go with attention that is prayer. Thus Dag Hammarskjöld at the turning point of his life writes, “For all that has been—Thanks! To all that shall be—Yes!” The “Thanks!” is a letting go of sadness, and the “Yes!” is a letting go of fear. What he is doing is not simply living in the present but living in the Presence, and relating to the past and the future out of an awareness of the presence of God.

Living in the Presence contrasts thus with living solely in the present, for instance with Faust saying “the present alone is our happiness.” If I live in the Presence in the present, I can have a positive relation with the past, “Thanks!” and a positive relation with the future, “Yes!” Let us see then what it would mean to let go of sadness and to let go of fear.

“They can be sad for a day. But they can’t hold on to sadness.” Letting go of sadness is more deliberate than being unable to hold on to sadness. It has the same effect, however, of being happy. Letting go of sadness comes about in living simply in the
present as well as in living in the Presence. The difference is in the relation to the past. “Thinking is thanking,” the mystical saying of the seventeenth century, goes with a positive relation with the past, as in “For all that has been—Thanks!” It is a mystical saying because it expresses communion with ultimate reality, remembering God and forgetting all things around in the attention that is prayer.

“The spirit looks neither forward nor backward,” Faust says. “The present alone is our happiness.” It is possible to interpret the sayings in the Gospel “not to look back” and “to take no thought for the morrow” thus in terms of living in the present, but they are meant, I believe, rather in terms of living in the Presence, as Dag Hammarskjöld says in retrospect of his moment of “Thanks!” and “Yes!” “From that moment I have known what it means ‘not to look back’ and ‘to take no thought for the morrow.’” There is a forgetting in not looking back and in taking no thought for the morrow, but there is also a remembering in thinking that is thanking.

Thus “Thinking is thanking,” if we understand it as living in the Presence in the present, means “For all that has been—Thanks!” It is “counting your blessings,” but more than that it is “thanking God always.” Kierkegaard tells the story of an actor who received a standing ovation and went home and fervently thanked God. That is not thanking God always, Kierkegaard said, but if the actor had been booed off the stage and then went home and fervently thanked God—that would be thanking God always!

It is true, “counting your blessings” tends to lift up the heart beyond sadness. Letting go of sadness does so more thoroughly and enables one to “thank God always.” “Noble-mindedness would be the nature of thinking and thereby of thanking,” Heidegger says. “Of that thanking which does not have to thank for something, but only thanks for being allowed to thank.” I take it, though, that thanking for being allowed to thank is actually thanking for something, namely for one’s existence.

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Letting go of fear, as in “To all that shall be—Yes!,” is harder, it seems to me, than letting go of sadness, as in “For all that has been—Thanks!” For the fear includes the fear of death. The remembering includes the remembering of mortality, *Memento mori*, and the forgetting includes the letting go of that fear in the hope of eternal life. Faith as “proving the unseen” is an answer to death, experiencing the life of the spirit, the life of knowing and loving as a deeper life that can live through death and survive it. The experience, nevertheless, is on this side of death.

Symbolic immortality can become real immortality as we go over from symbol to story. If we take birth and death as images, we can see emanation and return as insight into the images, emanation as insight into birth and return as insight into death. So the story is that of emanation and return, emanation from the One and return to the One. “There is nothing wiser than the circle,” Rilke says in his *Stories of God*. We seem to be at the far point on the circle in a secular age with the emanation behind and the return ahead. The great circle of all coming from God and all returning to God is a symbol, but when it becomes the story of a life it becomes a reality, a journey with God in time. All the same, it is an unfinished journey.

It is insight into death as a return, going home to God, that is a realization of eternal life. It is faith “proving the unseen,” the substance, the evidence of eternal life. It is faith seeking understanding, like Anselm’s proof for the existence of God, not a proof for pure reason but an understanding of faith. If we see time as a horizontal dimension and eternity as a vertical dimension passing through time at every present moment, as in the title scene of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, eternal life is in the vertical, the infinite peaceful sky Prince Andre perceives, lying on his back in the midst of the Battle of Austerlitz.

Letting go of fear, above all the fear of death, goes with consciousness of the eternal in us. “If there were no eternal consciousness in a man,” Kierkegaard says, “what would life be but
Eternal consciousness, I gather, is consciousness of the vertical dimension of eternity passing through the horizontal dimension of time at every present moment. Because it passes through time at every present moment it is easily confused with the present. Actually, though, it is presence in the present, especially the presence of God to the human being or the human being in the presence of God.

If the eternal is presence in the present, it is there in real presences, the presence of others, presence to self, and the presence of God. It is there in the mystery of encounter with others, in the mystery I am to myself, unable to leap over my own shadow, and above all in the mystery God is to me, in the cloud of unknowing that comes between me and God. If I see my life as a journey with God in time, the eternal is there in being with God in time, and there is my hope and my joy: “And Enoch walked with God: and he was not, for God took him” (Genesis 5:24). Being with God in time means turning over one’s hopes and fears to God and living in “the peace of God that passes all understanding” (Philippians 4:7).

Presence in the present, then, is the eternal in us. What is this presence? Once in a dream I met Saint Thomas Aquinas, a wisdom figure for me, and I asked him, “Do we love with a love we know or with a love we do not know?” And he replied, “With a love we do not know.” That thought, that we love with a love we do not know, seems to call for a spiritual journey in which we come to know the love. I think again of the saying of the old Bedouin whom Lawrence met in the desert, “The love is from God, and of God, and toward God.” The spiritual journey is a coming to realize the love, and the presence is of the known in the knowing and of the loved in the loving.

Coming to realize the love as letting go of fear and letting go of sadness is the forgetting in the remembering of God. Coming to realize the presence of the known in the knowing and of the loved in the loving is the remembering. Forgetting and...
remembering then, we love with a love we do not know, but we
come to know the love that is “from God, and of God, and to-
ward God.” So the spiritual journey is like Dante’s journey from
dark wood to white rose, from the dark wood of fear and sadness
to the white rose of love that is from and of and toward God.

Seeing life as a journey with God, and seeing life as a con-
flict with God, being with and facing, lead to different visions
of good and evil: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of
times. . . .”39 A journey with God in time, if I see my life this
way, leads to a letting go of fear and sadness and to a coming to
know love as from and of and toward God. It leads, as we shall
see now, to a vision of the emergence and the separation and
the reunion of humanity in which “a soul is oned with God.”