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A BETTER WAY

“God Is Still Love, and This Is Not His Will”

The Light That Shines Away the Darkness of Suffering

by Greg Mackie

Those who have read my writings know that the problem of suffering has been an ongoing concern of mine. You might even say it is a passion of mine (if you’ll

forgive the pun). Really, it never leaves my mind. Not a moment goes by when I’m not thinking about it, emotionally wrestling with it, or confronting it in my daily life. In a very real sense, it *is* my life. It is the substance of my days.

Given the importance of this issue for me, I’ve done a lot of writing on it. Some of that writing has been from a more scholarly perspective (see, for instance, my article on the theological problem of evil, [“If God Is Love, Why Do We Suffer?”](#)). But here, I want to write about it on a more personal level, the place I’m living day to day right now. I want to describe my current line of thinking on this topic, a line of thinking inspired by what I’m doing in my daily life. This line of thinking has really captivated me; it has given me a lot of comfort and even joy in the midst of the suffering I see every day. Since I’m writing this in December, it’s even giving me a new perspective on Christmas.

Two undeniable facts of life for me

There are two undeniable facts of life for me. Well, of course, there are other facts of life too, but these are the ones that really matter the most for me. Now, when I call them “undeniable facts,” I don’t mean that they are definitively proven in some way that would be convincing to everyone. I simply mean that they are undeniable *for me*. Whatever other people may think, I myself simply cannot escape them; they have become givens in my life.

Fact 1: Life is full of suffering

This is, of course, the Buddha’s First Noble Truth, so the idea has an illustrious pedigree. Students of *A Course in Miracles* may balk at my labeling suffering an “undeniable fact,” so let me clarify what I mean. As will be clear below, I’m not saying that suffering is a fact in the ultimate sense of being real. On the contrary, its ultimate reality is something the Course would say we can and should deny. When I call it an undeniable fact, I simply mean that in this world, everyone and everything *experiences* suffering to a far greater degree than we are usually willing to admit. It is endemic to life on earth.

This is evident in so many ways. For me right now, it especially evident in my work doing home care for the elderly. It is an honor and privilege to serve these beautiful people, and I’m so glad to have the opportunity to help them each day. But it’s simply staggering what the people in the private homes, assisted living facilities, and nursing/rehab centers I visit go through every day.

They suffer from every condition imaginable: strokes, heart attacks, arthritis, diabetes, osteoporosis, congestive heart failure, hearing loss, visual impairment, bedsores, incontinence, cancer, Parkinson’s, MS, and for me the most heartbreaking of all, dementia/Alzheimer’s. They try gamely to carry on, pressing forward with walkers, wheelchairs, or whatever else can carry them. Caregivers try to alleviate their pain and suffering with an endless list of medications. The worst off never leave bed at all. And the strangest thing of all is that none of this is unusual. Though some fortunate people are bet-

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WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT SAYS

A Course in Miracles is a spiritual path. Its purpose is to train us to work miracles—to accept and extend to others the shifts in perception that awaken us to God. It consists of three volumes, which signify the three aspects of its program:

- ◆ Text : Through studying the teaching, the Course's thought system first enters our minds.
- ◆ Workbook for Students: Through doing the practice, the Course's thought system penetrates more and more deeply into our minds.
- ◆ Manual for Teachers: Through extending our healed perception to others, the Course's thought system receives its final reinforcement and becomes the only thing in our minds.

The Course's message is that the source of our suffering is not the world's mistreatment of us, but rather our egocentric attack on the world. This attack convinces us that we have defiled our nature beyond repair, that we are irredeemably guilty. Yet the Course says true reality cannot be defiled; it is a realm of pure, changeless, unified spirit. This realization allows us to forgive the world's apparent mistreatment of us by recognizing that it did not actually occur. And as we see this forgiveness come forth from us—see that we are capable of something genuinely loving and egoless—we gradually realize that we never defiled ourselves. Thus we awaken to the untouched innocence of our true nature.

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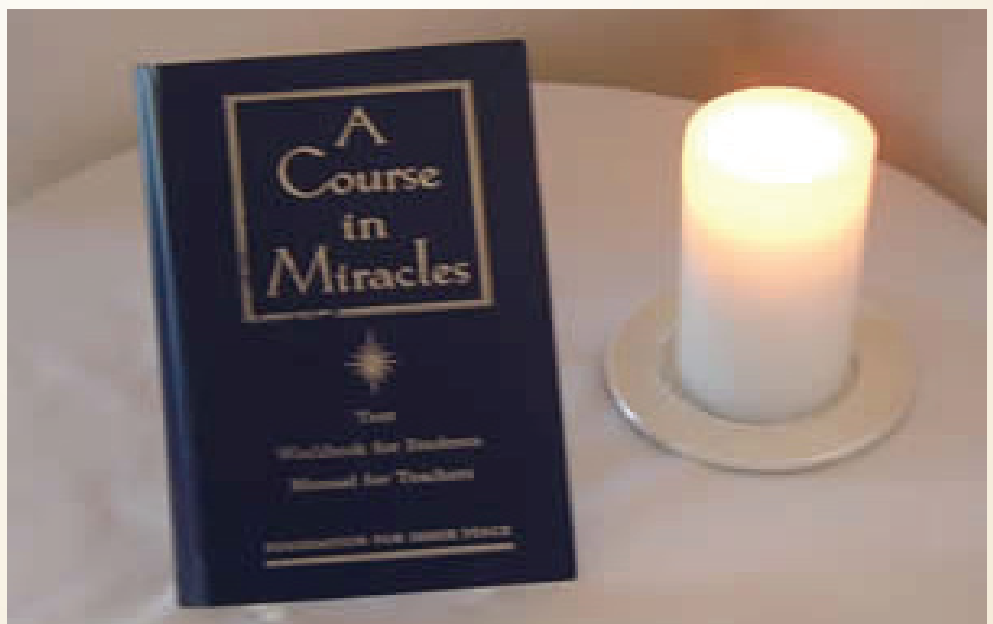
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ter off than others, this is just a day in the life for the elderly everywhere. And this is, of course, just one small corner of all the suffering in our world. (I recently read that one out of every five Americans — not just the elderly — suffers from chronic pain. Wow!)

Suffering is also painfully evident in the online [healing prayer ministry](#) that Pari Hakimi and I have recently started. Here, too, it has been an honor and privilege to serve those who have come to us for help; it has changed both of our lives in a beautiful way. But again, it's staggering to contemplate the litany of suffering we've received in our inboxes.

There's one family man who is seriously disabled from an auto accident, and another in a coma from falling off his roof. There are people with cancer. People with abusive spouses. People wrestling with mental illnesses and addictions. People enduring a wide variety of physical pains. People struggling with real financial hardship. People whose beloved spouses have died. And again, none of this is unusual. True, some of the specific events are more unusual than others, but the suffering as a whole is just another day of life on earth. Almost every day, the pathways of cyberspace bring more despair right to our doorstep.

Many try to deny or minimize this. Surely, they say, it isn't *that* bad. They sing with Louis Armstrong, "What a Wonderful World." I recently read a book by a doctor who says that *everything* that happens on earth — presumably, even AIDS and the Holocaust — is a miracle. But I'm just not capable of thinking like this. Yes, there are pleasant things in this world, and of course there is the miracle of genuine love here, which I'll get to below. But in my mind, the brute fact is that suffering is omnipresent here. It is basic to the fabric of life on earth. I simply cannot escape this conclusion.

Fact 2: God is pure Love

This second fact, of course, is not quite so evident as the first. The atheists among us say it is not a fact at all, but nothing more than a pipe dream of wishful minds. But over time, for me, this fact has become as undeniable as the fact of suffering. While obviously I don't believe it entirely on every level of my being (if I did, I would be awake), it is nonetheless a deep conviction. It feels as real to me as breathing.

The idea that God is Love started out for me as simply a belief that I felt *must* be true. I've felt this for as long as I can remember. I just couldn't imagine anything else being true. It simply seemed to be a belief I couldn't live without, so there it was in my mind, whether I had any real evidence for it or not. But over time, as I gained life experience and explored the issue in depth, the idea that God is pure Love became more than a belief without evidence. It became a belief buttressed *by* evidence.

First, there was the evidence in my own life. While I can't say that I have dramatic spiritual experiences all the time, my peak experiences have been utterly convincing. I remember in particular the experience that was the basis of my article "[If You Do It, You Will See That It Works: An Experience of Universal Love.](#)" In that experience, I felt God's Love as I never had before. It was utterly magnificent. It was the most real thing I've ever experienced. Words will forever fail to describe it. That experience left no doubt that God is a God of pure Love. And the reflection of that experience has stayed with me; I have been a happier, healthier, and more loving person ever since.

That experience, of course, was hardly unique to me. The God of pure Love has been experienced by countless others past and present, both the great mystics who have left us amazing written records of their experiences, and countless ordinary people whom we've never heard of. Skeptics, of course dismiss these experiences as everything from mere wishful thinking to mental illness. But historical and scientific research on spiritual experiences past and present shows that *something* powerful is going on here.

Of course, not every purported spiritual experience is genuine; sometimes it really *is* mental illness. But by and large, those who have experiences of God are sane people who, like me, regard those experiences as the most real thing they've ever encountered. And like me, these people have usually become happier, healthier, and more loving people as a result. The sheer number of such experiences is so large that they become very hard to dismiss. All of this convinces me of the reality of my own experience even more, because it means that it's not just some oddity of mine. My experience is validated by others.

One version of such experiences that has been the subject of rigorous scientific research lately is near-death experiences. I've read a lot about NDEs, and they never cease to amaze me. In account after account, you read about a "being of light" who is Infinite Love personified. You have accounts like that of Mellen-Thomas Benedict, who says, "It was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. It was like all the love you've ever wanted, and it was the kind of love that cures, heals, regenerates." Or that of "Janet," who said, "Suddenly the light went through me....As it did, I was filled with unconditional love which was so complete and powerful that I would need to invent new words to describe it."

Again, skeptics dismiss these experiences as mental illness, oxygen deprivation, etc., but none of these explanations have survived the scrutiny of serious research. Again, experiencers describe NDEs as the most real thing they have ever experienced, and again, they generally become happier, healthier, and more loving people as a result. Here we have another phenomenon that is very hard to dismiss. Here we have another phenomenon that shows me my experience of a loving God is not just my own strange delusion. If it's a delusion, it's one a lot of sane, healthy people are having.

Finally, a more recent piece of evidence for the God of Love is my experience with our new prayer ministry. No, we haven't cured cancer or raised the dead with our prayers. But we've had such wonderful feedback from the people for whom we've prayed that it is hard to deny that a powerful loving Presence is moving through us. (Here, too, there is a large body of scientific evidence showing the prayer really does heal people.) Even in the short time we've been doing the prayer ministry, Pari and I have experienced enough miracles of love that we cannot deny what is happening. It surely isn't happening just because of us. The God of Love is real, and He works miracles.

Just as with the pervasiveness of suffering, people like the skeptics we've discussed try to deny or minimize the reality of the God of Love. And I can understand why people who haven't had the kinds of experiences I've described would do so. But I simply cannot do so. There is simply too much evidence coming from too many angles — from religion and science, from within and without, from personal experience and the experience of others. In the end, for me, the evidence is simply overwhelming. God is Love, and that is that.

My problem: How do I reconcile these two seemingly irreconcilable facts?

Both of these facts are undeniable to me: the fact of great suffering, and the fact that at the heart of reality is a God of pure Love. Many people use one to deny the other. They either use suffering to deny the existence of a loving God, or use the idea of a loving God to say that suffering isn't really as awful as it seems. These methods of resolving the issue may well work for other people, but they have never worked for me. I simply can't use one of these facts to invalidate the other. In my eyes, the suffering really *is* unimaginably brutal. The God of Love really *is* unimaginably loving. How can I find a worldview that accommodates both of these things?

This is, of course, the classical problem of evil: If God is Love, why do we suffer? And this has been the dilemma I've wrestled with my whole life. For it seems that these two facts are irreconcilable. There is tremendous suffering. But if the heart of reality is a God of Love, how could there be suffering? It is hard to imagine that a truly loving Creator would set up a world in which His children would suffer so much. I've seen many attempts to resolve this issue, which I discuss in depth in my article on the problem of evil. But none of the explanations offered ever worked for me. That is, until I discovered the Course.

My solution: “God is still Love, and this is not His Will”

The Course has many ways of expressing its own unique solution to this dilemma. But this particular formulation of the Course's solution has been immensely reassuring to me lately. It comes from Lesson 99 of the Workbook. Here are a couple of passages that expand upon this idea:

Unshaken does the Holy Spirit look on what you see; on sin and pain and death, on grief and separation and on loss. Yet does He know one thing must still be true; God is still Love, and this is not His Will.

This is the Thought that brings illusions to the truth, and sees them as appearances behind which is the changeless and the sure. (W-pI.99.5:4-6:1)

Your Father loves you. All the world of pain is not His Will. Forgive yourself the thought He wanted this for you. Then let the Thought with which He has replaced all your mistakes [“God is still Love, and this is not His Will”] enter the darkened places of your mind that thought the thoughts that never were His Will. (W-pI.99.7:3-6)

What glorious words! Yes, we can't deny that we experience “sin and pain and death...grief and separation and...loss” in this world. Even the Holy Spirit sees that. But unlike us, He is not fazed by it. Why? Because there is a saving truth *He* can't deny: “God is still Love, and this is not His Will.” God didn't create a world in which His beloved children could suffer. He never wanted us to suffer, and He doesn't want us to suffer now for any reason: not as punishment for our “sins,” not to teach us “lessons,” not to help our souls evolve, not for anything at all. All He has ever wanted is our happiness. Period. And that's all He wants for us right now.

Where, then, does all the suffering come from? Though dreadfully real in our experience, it is ultimately nothing more than a nightmare in our fevered minds, a bitter punishment we have inflicted upon ourselves for the seeming “sin” of separating from God and from each other. It is merely an illusion; only God's Love is real.

Therefore, suffering is not the last word. God's Love is the last word, because only His Love is real. Both suffering and His Love undeniably exist in *some* sense, at least while we believe we are on earth. In the case of suffering, it exists as a self-generated experience in this illusory world. But in a deeper sense, the suffering is denied by God's Love, for suffering could never be the will of a truly loving God. God is still Love, so “all the world of pain” cannot be real because it is *not* His Will.

What a liberating idea! This is “the Thought that brings illusions to the truth.” This is “the Thought with which He has replaced all your mistakes.” This is the realization that, if taken fully to heart, has the power to end all forms of suffering, not in some far distant future when we awaken, but right here and right now. This is “the lesson that contains all of salvation’s power: . . . Pain is illusion; joy, reality. Pain is but sleep; joy is awakening. Pain is deception; joy alone is truth” (W-pI.190.10:3-6).

The priceless benefits of this solution

For me, this solution to the dilemma I’ve described is full of priceless benefits. First off, it is tremendously intellectually and emotionally satisfying, because it seems to account fully for my experience of both suffering and love. Yes, the suffering in this world of apparent separation from God is dreadful. It can’t be dressed up as God’s Love in disguise. As the Course says, “This *is* an insane world, and do not underestimate the extent of its insanity” (T-14.I.2:6). But it is just that: insanity, not truth. The truth remains that God is pure Love, just as I and so many others have experienced first-hand. Thus, this view accommodates both the experience of suffering and the experience of the God of pure Love.

True, I still experience suffering and see the suffering around me. But this view makes it all much more bearable, because God is not responsible for it. I think the greatest suffering of all is the belief that God is somehow behind our suffering — even if only because He (supposedly) created a physical world in which such suffering is possible. I can’t tell you how many times someone I’ve worked with has expressed some version of “Why did God do this? Why is He inflicting this on me?” The thought that this suffering is somehow God’s Will — “the thought He wanted this for you” — is the most painful thought of all.

It is painful not only because it’s so depressing to think God would want this for us, but also because it makes us reluctant to turn to Him for relief from suffering. I remember a segment on Jon Stewart’s *Daily Show* in which Stewart wryly noted that we are constantly praying to God to save us from acts of . . . God. As the Course says, when God is the one who caused our suffering, directly or indirectly, “it becomes impossible to turn to Him for help in misery” (T-23.II.7:2). But if we let God off the hook, if we realize that He is only Love and our suffering comes only from our illusions, “You can call on Him to save you from illusions by His Love, calling Him Father and yourself His Son” (W-pI.196.11:4). We can turn to Him for relief without the slightest reservation, because relief is *all* He offers.

The idea that “God is still Love, and this is not His Will” has further benefits. It carries within it the seeds of a beautiful meaning and purpose for our lives. For if suffering is not God’s Will and we are (as the Course says) His representatives on earth, then our purpose becomes clear: to bring God’s Love to “the desolate and lonely and afraid,” to bring His peace “to those who suffer pain, or grieve for loss, or think they are bereft of hope and happiness” (W-pII.245.1:4-5). This is, of course, the function of the miracle worker. This is the function *A Course in Miracles* is training us to fulfill.

And precisely because God’s Love is real and the suffering is illusion, we can take on this function with fully justified faith that our efforts will ultimately be successful. Working to heal suffering is not a futile attempt to stave off the inevitable death and destruction, which would be the case if there were no God or if God created this painful world. Instead, because Love is the only real power here, the complete healing of *any* form of suffering becomes the most natural thing in the world. The healing may take time to appear in form, but it is always there, and it has the potential to happen instantly. God’s Love *always* heals suffering of all kinds; there are no exceptions. This idea, even though I’m far from realizing it fully, has given me a great deal of hope and inspiration as I have worked with Pari in our prayer ministry.

My question each moment: What is real here? Suffering or God’s Love?

I’ve come to realize that there is a constant tension in my life between my two undeniable facts. It is easy to focus on the suffering so much that I lose sight of God’s Love. This is a recipe for despair. It is also possible, though I’m not quite so prone to this, to focus on God’s Love in a way that papers over the suffering around me in an unhealthy way. This is a recipe for false denial, for what has been called “platitudinal healing.” I want to avoid both tendencies.

Therefore, I’ve tried to remind myself to fully acknowledge both the fact of suffering in this world *and* the fact that God’s Love is greater than suffering — God’s Love has the last word. So, I’m finding myself asking some version of these questions each moment I look upon suffering in myself or another: As painful as this experience undeniably feels, what is real here? Suffering or God’s Love? Which do I choose to see as the real power, the last word? Which do I choose to affirm as the ultimate truth in this situation right now?

The light that shines away the darkness of suffering

The idea that “God is still Love, and this is not His Will” has become a powerful tonic for me. And since it is the Christmas season as I write this, naturally I’ve thought about to how this idea relates to the Christmas message.

The Course speaks a great deal of Christmas, and we’ve drawn out its Christmas message in many previous articles in *A Better Way*. One Christmas symbol the Course uses is the familiar image of the Star of Bethlehem:

The sign of Christmas is a star, a light in darkness. See it not outside yourself, but shining in the Heaven within, and accept it as the sign the time of Christ has come. (T-15.XI.2:1-2)

For me, this year, that shining star is the thought that “God is still Love, and this is not His Will.” This has become for me the light in darkness — the light of God’s Love, reflected in the Christ within each of us, shining away the darkness of the world’s suffering.

This Christmas season, and in all seasons, may you take this beautiful thought to heart. May you experience the blessed relief that comes with the recognition that, no matter what suffering you may be experiencing, this darkness will inevitably be shined away by the light of God’s Love. For “God is still Love, and this is not His Will.”



E-mail your comments to the author at: greg@circleofa.org

Greg Mackie has been a student of *A Course in Miracles* since 1991, and a teacher for the Circle of Atonement since 1999. He writes Course Q & A's and “Course Meets World” articles for the Circle of Atonement's website, and is one of the co-leaders of the Circle Course Community. He sees his primary function as helping to develop a tradition of Course scholarship.

CIRCLE NEWS

5th Annual St. Louis ACIM Weekend Retreat

ACIM St. Louis invites you to attend the 5th Annual St. Louis ACIM Weekend Retreat — April 15-17, 2011 with presenters Robert Perry, Greg Mackie, and Allen Watson. This will be a rare opportunity to learn from all three of the Circle of Atonement's scholars of ACIM, especially since Robert Perry is now living in England. The theme of the weekend is “A Day in the Life of a Miracle Worker.” For more information, go to the ACIM St. Louis at website at <http://www.acimstlouis.org/events.html>.

CIRCLE MAILBOX

The following are responses from the Circle Course Community to Robert's article in A Better Way #107, “‘All My Sorrows End in Your Embrace’: The Concept of ‘Embrace’ in A Course in Miracles.”

Recently, I had one of the biggest forgiveness challenges I have had for a long time. Throughout my more than twenty-four hours of unforgiving misery, I was aware that my real “problem” was my belief in my vulnerability. I tried to “accept the Atonement,” and reminded myself that, even at that moment, I was totally loved by God. Somehow, I

couldn't see that as real. I wanted the big hug, or at least the love-based smile that let me know the big hug was there. Something unseen, accepted on faith, didn't cut it then.

After stepping out of that short-lived but much-too-long insanity, I read, again, "All My Sorrows End in Your Embrace," and realized that this is what I was, and I think, I always *am*, looking for. This very tangible intangible, God's Love (as real as a total embrace in form, and as beyond-form real as that embrace now present for *everyone*), is already ours, and knowing that turns me from a love grasper to a love giver, from a black hole to a radiant star of giving.

This tangibly intangible love, which we all share in such heartwarming abundance, is offered throughout the Course. But it is hard to find when your ego-dominated mind is actively suffering. I am very grateful for your article, Robert. It holds that love out resplendent for us. And I intend to keep it handy and input some of those beautiful thoughts, daily.

— Barb Hembling

• • •

Robert, I appreciated the article very much. Lately I had been using some of the lessons that you mention, to help a couple of people through very trying times, through senses of abandonment and loss. Here you have put it all together for us, to help us and also for us to use to help others. It was most timely for me. These are really beautiful lessons and passages to encourage us to overcome our loneliness and fears, and to feel at home in God. Thank you for how you dealt with the subject in such a caring way and made it available in a great article.

— Gerry Hofstra

• • •

Thank you, Robert, for an amazingly powerful piece! I have printed it out for myself so that I can keep repeating its message to myself and anyone else open to hearing it! Thanks and love to all joining in this.

— Susan Papp

• • •

Robert, when I read your article I felt another level of the Course opening up for me and for all your readers. Comfort in any form is a welcome concept. Thank you!

— Karen Sinclair