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# A BETTER WAY

## Breaching the Wall of Pain

by Greg Mackie

Source of material commented on: <http://tinyurl.com/24jxjud>

I recently read a fascinating book entitled *The Language of Pain: Finding Words, Compassion, and Relief*. This book, by Dr. David Biro, deals with the issue of how pain isolates us and erects a wall between ourselves and others. It focuses on how we can communicate our pain more effectively — as the subtitle suggests, how we can find words to describe our pain so we can find compassion and relief. As someone who works with people who suffer pain, the book has had great practical value for me. And as a *Course in Miracles* student, it has prompted me to reflect on what the Course says about how to breach the wall of pain and find the relief we seek.

Biro has dealt with pain as both doctor and patient. As a doctor, he is confronted daily with patients in pain, and is faced with the difficulty of trying to understand their symptoms so he can offer his patients relief. As a patient, he suffered from a rare blood disease that caused him a great deal of pain and confronted him with the dilemma of trying to describe his symptoms to *his* doctors. In both roles, and in reading about the experiences of others in pain, he encountered a strange paradox at the heart of the experience of pain.

The paradox is this. On the one hand, pain feels like the ultimate private experience. It is something that is happening just *to you*; no one around you is feeling what you are feeling. Moreover, it is difficult to communicate, because even when it is intense, it has an abstract, amorphous quality to it that seems indescribable. When we say “cat” and point to a feline, everyone knows exactly what we mean, but when we say we are in “pain,” what exactly are we pointing to? It is hard to pin down. Because of these difficulties, pain is an isolating experience. It erects a wall that seems to cut us off from others. It appears that there is just me and my pain; the world outside is no more.

Yet on the other hand, those who are in pain are constantly trying to breach the wall, and they are able to do so to some extent. After all, we *do* have a language for pain, and that fact all by itself shows that pain is not entirely private; it can be communicated. Moreover, everyone has experienced pain, so our language for pain connects with the experiences of others in a way that they can understand to some extent. So, oddly enough, even though we find pain indescribable, we are endlessly trying to describe it. Our apparently private experience has a public aspect. Pain feels inexpressible, yet we are compelled to express it.

Pain is thus *difficult* but not *impossible* to communicate to others. In Biro’s view, what is therefore needed is a more effective language of pain, a language that better enables us to communicate our pain to others. For Biro, this more effective language is the language of metaphor, language which enables us to make the abstract, amorphous experience of pain more concrete and specific. We escape from our isolation by engaging in what philosopher Nelson Goodman calls “worldmaking,” creating a new way of seeing the pre-given world through metaphor — in this case, a new way of seeing our pain.

Biro spends much of the book describing particular types of metaphor, drawn not only from actual pain sufferers but from great art and literature. There are *agency* metaphors, in which the pain is seen as an external agent attacking the body (such as a stabbing knife). There are *projection* metaphors, in which the pain is projected to an outside object which serves to symbolize it (such as vultures that symbolize decay and death). And there are *X-ray* metaphors, in which internal bodily processes are described in vivid, nonliteral ways (such as describing the nervous system as an electrical grid).

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*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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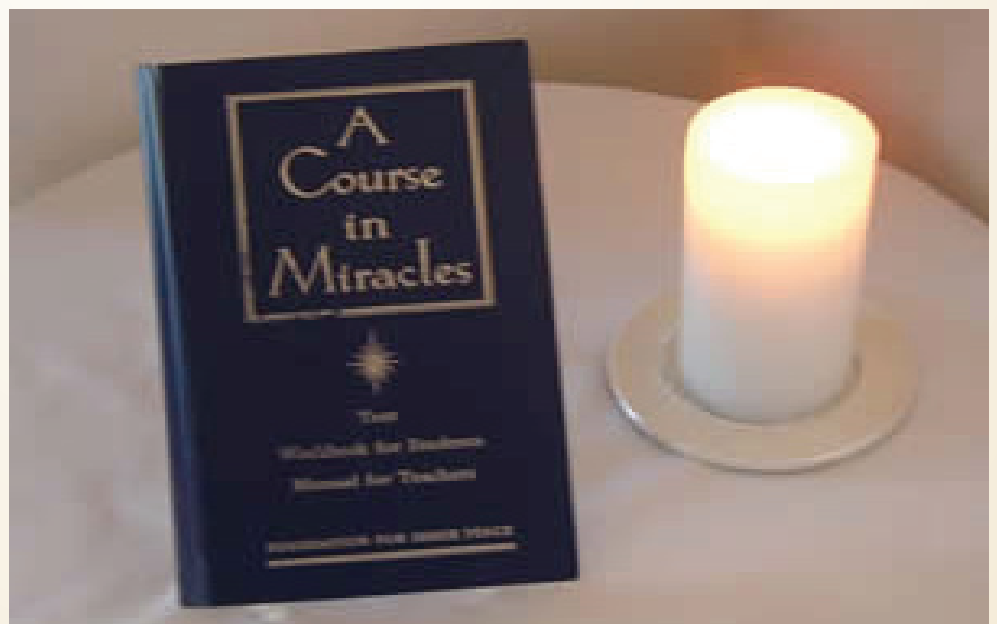
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What is the point of all this? Biro sees several practical uses for this more effective language of pain. First, it enables sufferers to more effectively communicate pain to their caregivers, so the caregivers will be better able to provide relief. Second, it enables sufferers to publicly validate the existence of pain, to acknowledge it as a basic part of everyday experience which cannot and should not be overlooked. Finally, the very act of successfully communicating their pain to others enables sufferers to breach the wall of pain. This communication is thus itself a form of relief from the “pain within the pain”: the pain of isolation, what William Styron called the “aching solitude” of pain. Sharing the suffering, in and of itself, helps to ease the suffering.

When I reflect on what *A Course in Miracles* says about pain, I see some similarities with Biro’s perspective, but also some stark differences. One similarity I see is a Course version of the paradox Biro describes. On the one hand, the Course says, the experience of pain is indeed an experience of isolation, as the following passage about sickness makes clear:

Sickness is isolation. For it seems to keep one self apart from all the rest, to suffer what the others do not feel...[It seems to] keep the mind in solitary prison, split apart and held in pieces by a solid wall of sickened flesh, which it can not surmount. (W-pI.137.2:1-3)

On the other hand, the Course acknowledges that we also try to communicate our pain to others. We share our suffering with others, and they try to empathize, to “join in suffering” (T-16.I.1:1). And the Course certainly does want us to recognize the suffering of others so that we will be willing and able to offer healing to them. In one of my favorite lines, the Course says, “Look about the world, and see the suffering there. Is not your heart willing to bring your weary brothers rest?” (W-pI.191.10:7-8). Surely one form this can take is gently listening to our weary brothers as they try to communicate their suffering to us.

But though the Course has its own version of Biro’s paradox, its overall view of the problem of pain differs sharply from his. That difference stems from a profoundly different worldview. By and large, Biro seems to adhere to the modern secular view that we are embodied creatures living in a pre-given, random external world, and pain is simply part and parcel of living here. For Biro, pain is imposed on us by the body and the external world against our will, often without any reason. While of course he acknowledges that human choices can play a role in producing pain and illness, often “diseases just happen” (p. 121).

In a strong repudiation of alternative views, Biro says that we mustn’t stretch the metaphors we use to describe the cause of our pain too far, for this

leads to a host of...harmful and often ridiculous notions — that God, for example, or patients themselves (because they are repressed or extroverted, religious or atheistic), are ultimately responsible for their suffering. (p. 123)

Therefore, for Biro, the problem is that pain has been imposed on us by the vagaries of life, and this pain walls us off from other people: Our undesired pain leads to isolation.

This is the biggest difference between Biro’s view of pain and the Course’s, for central to the Course’s view is one of Biro’s “ridiculous notions”: the notion that we are ultimately responsible for our suffering. The Course is adamant that pain is caused entirely by our own minds — “It is your thoughts alone that cause you pain” (W-pI.190.5:1) — and we inflict pain on ourselves precisely because we *want* to wall ourselves off from other people. It is not that our undesired pain leads to isolation. Rather, our desire for isolation leads to pain.

We can see this use of pain as an intentional ploy to isolate ourselves in this passage about sickness, which occurs the paragraph before the “Sickness is isolation” passage above:

Sickness is a retreat from others, and a shutting off of joining. It becomes a door that closes on a separate self, and keeps it isolated and alone. (W-pI.137.1:3-4)

In another striking passage, the Course speaks of how we use pain to isolate ourselves from the Voice for God, the Holy Spirit:

[Pain] is a loud, obscuring voice whose shrieks would silence what the Holy Spirit says, and keep His words from your awareness. Pain compels attention, drawing it away from Him and focusing upon itself. (T-27. VI.1:2-3)

What's going on here? Why would we *intentionally* suffer to isolate ourselves from others and even from God? To understand this, we have to turn to the Course's account of how the world came about.

When God created us in the beginning, we were limitless spiritual beings in an entirely nonphysical Heaven. In this state, we were in perfect, unmediated communication with one another and with God. This was communication of pure, infinite love and nothing else — indeed, in the Course's view, love is the only thing that can be truly communicated. (In this world we can communicate other things like anger and fear, but this is a kind of pseudo-communication.) Even now, our true Identity remains in Heaven, where “It is in complete and direct communication with every aspect of creation, because it is in complete and direct communication with its Creator” (T-4.VII.3:4).

But then, in a misguided quest for autonomy, we desired to separate from God and from each other — we wanted to break communication. This wasn't really possible; what God had joined could not be put asunder. But part of our minds could *think* it was possible, and so we convinced ourselves that we had really done it. “The separation was not a loss of perfection, but a failure in communication” (T-6.IV.12:5). It now appeared that we had successfully jammed the signals of perfect communication and turned ourselves into lone wolves that could not truly communicate at all.

The physical world we seem to live in now is our projection of this intentional “failure in communication.” It is a place in which each of us seems to be inherently cut off from others, “a separate entity that [moves] in isolation, unattached, and housed within a body” (W-pII.223.1:1). As we've seen, pain and sickness are ways we use within this world to further cut off communication. (Pain and sickness also stem from our guilt over our attempts to break communication, but that is a topic unto itself.) The Course claims that even our attempts to communicate our pain to others, rather than being genuine attempts to join with them, are usually unconscious attempts to separate ourselves from them by subtly blaming them for our painful condition. Our pain and sickness send the message “Behold me, brother, at your hand I die” (T-27.I.4:6) — which, of course, just cements the separation even more deeply into place. The desire to cut off communication has led infinite, eternally joined beings to “separate into their private worlds” (T-13.V.4:3). And there we seem to remain.

Obviously, we aren't aware of all this now; the origins of the delusional system I've described are buried deep in our unconscious minds. But the bottom line is that in the Course's view, the pain and suffering we experience in this world don't “just happen,” as Biro says. They are the direct, self-inflicted result of our desire to cut off communication with others and with God. This problem — our desire for isolation, which leads to pain — is the real problem that needs to be solved.

What, then, is the solution? In fairness to Biro, I think there is genuine value in communicating pain, and in developing more effective means to do so. The last thing I want to do is foster an attitude of denial all too common in New Age circles, where people are afraid to even mention their pain or sickness, lest they look “unspiritual” and endure an onslaught of well-meaning friends saying, “What did you do to create that?” Clearer communication of suffering can indeed awaken compassion and help caregivers in their efforts to relieve that suffering. I've learned a lot from Biro's book that will be of great practical value as I work with people who suffer. It will enable me to help them describe what is happening to them, which will increase my effectiveness as a caregiver.

That being said, it's clear that from the Course's standpoint, the ultimate solution to the problem of pain isn't learning how to communicate our pain more effectively. The solution isn't “worldmaking,” building a symbolic world to represent our pain. We've already done that all too well in our making of the physical world; our worldmaking is part of the *problem*. No, instead of communicating our pain, the ultimate solution is to restore true communication, the communication of *love*. The solution is to undo the desire to cut off communication with others and with God — the desire at the root of our pain — and to restore our awareness of the unlimited communication that has never truly been broken.

How do we accomplish this? Undoing our desire to break communication doesn't happen overnight, because we have a strong investment in our private worlds. This resistance is highlighted in a Text section on the holy instant, an instant in which we step out of those private worlds and enter “a time in which you receive and give perfect communication” (T-15.IV.6:5). The section says that we are capable of entering the holy instant now and forever at this very moment, but we don't. Why? Because we “prefer to have private thoughts and keep them” (T-15.IV.7:1). We prefer our private worlds, painful though they may be.

This sounds strange, but think about it: How do you feel when you contemplate the idea of your mind being totally open to every other mind, with nothing hidden whatsoever? Doesn't that sound at least a little scary? The Course claims that it sounds scary not because of that dirty little secret you want to keep to yourself, but because you don't want to be totally open to the communication of limitless love: “breaking communication [still] holds value to you” (T-15.IV.8:2). And as long we feel this way, we will remain in our private worlds and use pain to keep ourselves there.

But eventually our resistance to communication weakens, if for no other reason than we just get tired of the pain that separation brings. As a famous Course passage tells us, “Tolerance for pain may be high, but it is not without limit. Eventually everyone begins to recognize, however dimly, that there *must* be a better way” (T-2.III.3:5-6). Once we have a little willingness to open the true channels of loving communication once again, we are on our way.

How can we open ourselves to true communication once again? There are many ways, of course, but one powerful way is walking the path of the Course. Its teachings show us how we retreated into our private worlds and how we can emerge from them into the light of perfect communication once again. Its spiritual practices, like prayer and meditation, give us living experiences of real communication with God and our brothers. Its mind training puts us in daily contact with the Holy Spirit, “the remaining Communication Link between God and His separated Sons” (C-6.3:1). The Holy Spirit helps us join one another in holy relationships, relationships in which “is the ability to communicate instead of separate reborn” (T-22.I.7:1). Finally, the Course’s goal is to train us to become miracle workers, extenders of the miracles that the Course calls “communication devices” (T-1.I.46:2), the most potent means at our disposal for joining. It is through extending miracles of love to our brothers that full communication is ultimately restored.

I want to speak a little more on this last aspect, because one way in which we can all emerge from our painful prisons into the light of loving communication once again is to turn to the miracle workers among us for help. I spoke above about our attempts to empathize, to “join in suffering.” Unfortunately (in the Course’s view), our usual way of doing this is empathizing with weakness, which ends up reinforcing the very pain we are hoping to relieve. Biro speaks of the importance of validating pain through sharing it, but from the Course’s perspective, this is not an effective means of relieving it.

The miracle worker, on the other hand, has learned how to “empathize with strength” (T-16.I.2:7) — to gently look past the pain we seem to be experiencing to the eternal strength of Christ in us. In other words, the miracle worker looks past our private prison of pain to the aspect of us that is forever in communication with God and all our brothers. This is how he heals: He “calls forth the miracle of healing” by “seeing only the face of Christ shining in front of him, correcting all mistakes and healing all perception” (M-22.4:4-5).

Who among us would not benefit from the blessing of someone who could see us in this way? True, advanced miracle workers who can see the Christ consistently are rare, but all of us have the potential to perform this service for our brothers to a greater and greater degree as we progress on the path. We have the power within us to “draw them from their private worlds” (T-13.V.7:10). I look forward to the day when there is a tradition of Course-based healers who are skilled at performing the miracles the Course is training us to perform. Such a tradition would be an untold blessing for our suffering world.

What does this approach to pain look like in everyday life? I’ve spoken of two seemingly contradictory things: 1) there is value in communicating pain more effectively in the way Biro advocates, and 2) the ultimate solution to the problem of pain is not to communicate pain more effectively, but to communicate the forever pain-free love that is our true nature. How do these two things go together? I see a kind of two-tiered approach, in which we communicate our pain as a current fact of our earthly experience, while at the same time affirming our eternal, absolutely invulnerable reality beyond any earthly experience. We communicate the pain simply as a practical matter, to help people know what we are going through, but at the same time we recognize that our reality is unaffected by that pain.

This may sound unrealistic, and indeed for many of us it may be too much to expect, especially when the pain is intense. Pain *does* compel attention. Biro speaks of the difficulty of actually practicing the communication techniques he advocates, and says that each of us should simply try the best we can. I would say the same about the approach I’m putting forth here. All we can do is try our best, moment by moment, to reach past our pain and touch that place in us that is forever beyond the pain.

Fortunately, this *is* possible; I’ve seen it with my own eyes. I’m thinking in particular of a Course-student friend of mine who is currently undergoing treatment for cancer. To me, he is an amazing example of the very approach I’m advocating. On the one hand, he honestly tells me about the pain he is experiencing in his treatment, as I’m sure he is doing with his doctors as well. He’s not trying to pretend it isn’t there in his experience.

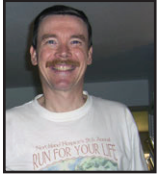
But on the other hand, there is such an air of freedom about him. It’s clear that he’s not terribly bothered by the pain. His carefree attitude says that he is not defined by the pain; it doesn’t say anything about who he is. He really seems to be identifying with the invulnerable Christ in him. As a result, he is full of love and joy. Indeed, I seem to be more concerned about his condition than he is, to the point where I feel like *he* is comforting *me*. He is truly an inspiration to me. And though for the moment his symptoms still persist, I wouldn’t be surprised if he eventually has a complete remission, as he has had before.

In conclusion, the Course presents a very different method than Biro for breaching the wall of pain. For Biro, we do so by communicating it more effectively, thus validating it, sharing it with others, and making it easier for caregivers to treat it. For the Course, we do so by looking beyond the pain even as we communicate it, thus not validating it, but instead communicating the love that is our true nature and truly joining with others in that love. Doing this promises to not only overcome the problem of isolation, but the problem of pain itself: “Healing is the effect of minds that join, as sickness comes from minds that separate” (T-28.III.2:6).

As much as I admire what Biro is doing, in the end I find the Course’s vision much more hopeful. Communication

of pain may be helpful, but real and lasting *release* from pain is what we all yearn for. Rather than making the best of inevitable and unavoidable pain, we can rejoice in the realization that the Course says 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)



E-mail your comments to the author at: [greg@circleofa.org](mailto: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 &mdash; 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 is feedback we’ve received on Greg’s article in A Better Way #108, “God Is Still Love, and This Is Not His Will: The Light That Shines Away the Darkness of Suffering.”*

Thank you, Greg, for your beautiful message in the current issue of *A Better Way*. You have reminded us all of a great, powerful and comforting Truth.

— Jean Petersen

• • •

Another excellent, deeply heartfelt article. Thank you, Greg!

I agree with you wholeheartedly about the dichotomy you so eloquently depicted in your article. The only aspect of suffering that I’d add to the pot is when many of our brothers and sisters erroneously feel the path of salvation is suffering and commit to doing so with one hundred percent conviction. Unfortunately, too many people get their “pleasure” from being a victim. Of course this is only a manifestation of the fear of the Love of Christ and God.

Thank you for all you do.

— Karen Sinclair

Thanks Greg for your article entitled “God Is Still Love, and This Is Not His Will.” I was moved by the description of the work you do with the sick and suffering and especially by the understanding of suffering and the love of God that you bring to that work. Your “patients” are fortunate indeed to have a caretaker with the attitude you expressed in this article. God bless you, and thanks again for your sharing.

— Robert Hellmann M.A.

• • •

Yes, I too have been conflicted regarding this subject of the illusion of suffering versus the truth of Peace, Joy and Freedom, it being only in my mind to choose between the two. It’s clear I can’t have both choices: “You must choose between total freedom and total bondage, for there are no alternatives but these.”

Though if I really knew this, I wouldn’t continue with the pain, would I? I would willingly accept what Jesus has reiterated, ask for help from the Holy Spirit, and forgive totally so I can love totally, knowing that I am One.

Ah, but I must give up my thinking and my identity, the concept of time and space. Do I really believe I am Brother to Jesus, One with the Holy Spirit and One with God? Can I trust that? That is the crux of the challenge for me. Why do I fear this so?

Thanks for your continuing insight.

— Susan Ferren

• • •

I usually save *Better Way* documents to reread later. I expect this latest one of yours is one I will reread many times. Most Course students would talk about “buying into the illusion.” However, you really haven’t done this. Instead you acknowledge that the pain and suffering you see is an undeniable fact in this world. I loved how you followed that up with seeing God’s love as an undeniable fact as well....

I just wanted to let you know how much I appreciate your words and relate to them.

— Ceci Cole

• • •

Greg, as you are engaged with your clients and prayer circle participants, how/what response/s do you offer when you hear them expressing thoughts of separation, victimization? Do you offer them the thought: God is still Love and this is not His will for you?

— Diane Butler

*Response from Greg:*

*Thanks for your question. On an internal level, I offer that thought and others like it from the Course all the time. On an external level (what I verbally express to them), it depends upon the situation. When I’m working with the elderly in my job, I won’t talk about God or spiritual ideas unless they bring up the subject. But with the prayer ministry, of course, it is a different story, because those people have come to me for prayers. So, I’m much more likely to verbally share thoughts like that with them. At all times, of course, I try to let the Holy Spirit guide what I say.*