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A BETTER WAY

“Do Not See Error”

How Not Making Error Real Makes Forgiveness Easy

by Robert Perry

We Course students are always struggling with forgiveness. It seems hard enough to wrap our heads around the way the Course defines the concept, let

alone actually practice that way. And since forgiveness is universally acknowledged to be the central teaching of the Course, we need all the help we can get.

Help for me lately has been coming from the idea of not making error real. We may think of this as “not making *the error real*”—not doing things that make the physical world real—but this is not the concept’s actual meaning in the Course. That meaning, it turns out, is all about forgiveness.

Forgiveness eventually takes center stage in the Course, but in the first eight chapters, it is mentioned only eighteen times (twenty-six times in the Urtext), and then only in passing. It is not until Chapter 9 that forgiveness makes its first significant appearance, in a trio of sections (III, IV, and V) aimed at explaining the Course’s concept of forgiveness. In these three sections, Course-based forgiveness is the same thing as not making error real. After that, this concept continues to periodically appear throughout the Course and its supplements (*Psychotherapy* and *The Song of Prayer*). Indeed, in *The Song of Prayer*, it is given as the very definition of true forgiveness: “*Do not see error. Do not make it real*” (S-2.I.3:3-4).

Why is not making error real so closely identified with forgiveness? The reason is that it’s about not making real *the errors of others*, those very errors we are trying to forgive, but rather leaving them unreal, which is what they truly are. It’s not hard to see how this leads directly to forgiveness. If you think of an error someone made that seemed to cause anger in you, and then imagine that that error was actually not real, what happens to your anger? Well, if the error wasn’t real, then getting angry at it is like getting mad at Santa Claus. Things that aren’t real don’t warrant an emotional reaction. Therefore, if you can truly accept that a certain error wasn’t real, then you *have* forgiven.

The philosophical basis for the unreality of error is that what is real is what has real effects, and real effects are defined by the power to alter what is permanently true. According to the Course, a person’s errors cannot actually do this. Errors do seem to have real effects. Their essence is attack and therefore a brother’s errors seem to alter—specifically, *injure*—our identity. Yet, in fact, they don’t really possess that ability. Our true Identity is changeless and that means *invulnerable*. Nothing can hurt it, not in the slightest degree. The errors of others just bounce off it, without effect. As the Course says, “What has no effect does not exist, and to the Holy Spirit the effects of error are nonexistent.” (T-9.IV.5:5).

To forgive, then, we just need to keep from seeing the errors of others as real. Yet, practically speaking, how exactly do we do that? Recently, I tried to pull all of the Course’s material on this concept together to see what picture was painted. The result has had a powerful impact on me and I hope it does on you, too. What I found was a series of ways in which we usually make someone’s errors real.

1. Looking for errors

If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that we have a mental habit of looking for the mistakes and character

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Circle of Atonement

P.O. Box 4238

West Sedona, AZ 86340

Phone: (928) 282-0790

Fax: (928) 282-0523

Toll-free (orders only): (888) 357-7520

E-mail: info@circleofa.org

Website: www.circleofa.org

Bookstore: www.circlepublishing.org

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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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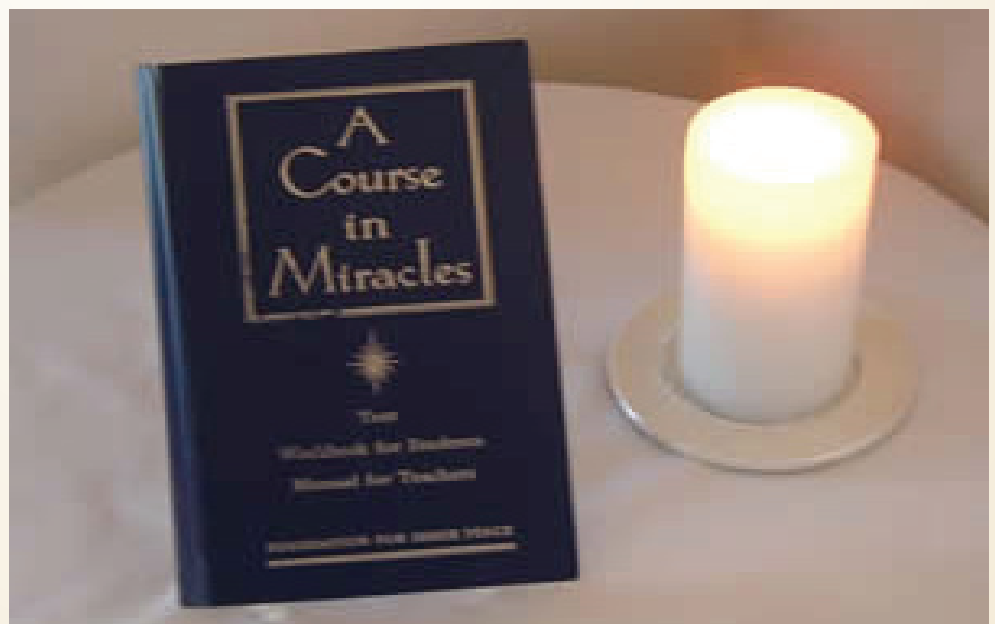
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allen@circleofa.org - (503) 916-9411



flaws of others. Think how quickly our attention goes to scandal, or how happily we greet the slip-up of someone we dislike. Let's face it, we have a morbid fascination with the mistakes of others, and we look for them. We are like master detectives, constantly on the hunt for the evidence that will convict our suspects.

The Course is keenly aware of this and frames our selective attention to errors as a powerful current in our psyches, so powerful that it literally constructs the world we see. As such, we tend to see wall-to-wall error, which in the end convinces us that error is the only thing that is real, and that true goodness is a naïve pipe dream (T-11.V.14:6). The Course implies that "the alertness of the ego to the errors of other egos" is how we currently understand vigilance (T-9.III.1:1). It says that we "Seek and find and 'love'" sins and crimes (S-2.I.2:2), and that our mind "carefully picks out all evil things" (S-2.I.2:4). It even likens this habit of ours to sending out a pack of starved, crazed hunting dogs that savagely search for, pounce on, and devour evidence of guilt in others (T 19.IV(A).12:5-7). It's an extreme image, but can we really say that it's untrue?

Of course, to hunt for something implies that it's really there. If the errors of others are not real, then in looking for them we are doing the equivalent of hunting for the Easter Bunny. And we are doing it all the time.

2. Placing our attention on error

Having looked for error, once we find it, we place our attention squarely on it. As the Course says, we "attend to" errors (T 9.III.4:2); we "dwell on" sins (W-pI.134.15:2); we "let [our] perception rest upon" mistakes (T-9.IV.1:3); we "focus on [our] brother's sins" (W-pI.181.2:5). Having fixed our gaze upon it, we "see error clearly" (T-9.IV.4:4). When it comes to people's errors, it seems that none of us have an attention deficit.

It is this intense, lingering stare of ours that makes our brother's errors seem so real. *Anything* we focus on with that kind of intensity will seem real. Imagine, for instance, that you spent ten minutes staring at some insignificant stain on the carpet, exploring with your eyes its contours and color, speculating on exactly how it got there, and wondering what the reactions of others are to it. Won't it seem vastly more real than it did before those ten minutes? The Course says that because of our concentrated focus on them, "mistakes loom large and grow and swell within" our sight (S-2.I.2:3).

The very act of giving something attention implies that it is real. If the errors of others truly are unreal, then why attend to them at all? Why let our eyes rest on them? We could instead see things as the Holy Spirit does. Speaking of our brother, the Course says, "The Holy Spirit does not perceive his errors" (T-9.III.3:1). What would it be like to see someone through a lens that included *none* of his errors? What would the person look like then?

3. Interpreting, analyzing, and evaluating errors

Of course, once we have searched for, found, and focused on someone's error, then the real forensic work begins. We need to measure its size and impact, take it apart to understand its inner workings, and psychoanalyze it to uncover its real motivation. With the really meaty errors, this can literally keep us busy for years. The Course is well aware of this process. It speaks of us interpreting errors (T-12.I.1:8) and "analyzing the motives" behind them (T-12.I.1:6). It says that we "attempt to understand" them (T-9.III.3:3) and "evaluate the errors" that we plan to (someday) overlook (S-2.III.1:3).

Yet the Course points out the obvious: "To interpret error is to give it power" (T-12.I.1:8). Why on earth would we want to give power to something we believe has hurt us? In the Urtext, Jesus talks about Bill being fixated on the time when his father "came to his new office and 'destroyed' it," and then asks this pointed question: "Why should anyone accord an obvious misperception so much power?" When we analyze someone's error, we tend to think we are arming ourselves to deal with it and hence depriving it of power. Would we analyze it if we realized we were *giving* it power?

The Course says, "There is but one interpretation of motivation that makes any sense" (T-12.I.3:1): Everything that is not love "is an appeal for healing and help, regardless of the form it takes" (T-12.I.3:4). That is how we are supposed to interpret all error, as a call for help. In this sense, all errors are exactly the same. They are simply innocent appeals for help.

4. Trying to actively point out, correct, and oppose errors

Of course, we know where this is all leading. The whole process is leading up to actually wiping those errors from existence. Secretly gloating over the error is nice, of course, but getting the person to actually acknowledge her error and correct it is the real gold. Again, the Course is on top of this process. It speaks of us pointing out errors (T-9.III.2:1 and 3:1). It mentions that as part of this we might actually furnish that person with an itemized list of errors (T-6.V.4:1). We might also need to convince her that her behavior really *is* an error, which may mean arguing with her about it, trying "to establish its error or demonstrate its falsity" (M-18.1:2). Finally, of course, we correct the error. We tell her how to live differently in the future, and having issued our sage advice, we expect it to be followed.

Of course, this person may be so attached to her error that she will not accept any sort of correction. In this case, all we can do is make sure that her error doesn't end up controlling us. Thus, if she insists we do some "outrageous" thing, *we* will then "insist on refusing" her (T-12.III.2:3).

Obviously, what we are trying to do here is make sure the waves of this error stop pounding our shores. Yet of course that implies they *are* pounding our shores—are having a real effect on us. And that means they are real. If, in fact, errors are not real, then we can skip all the pointing out, itemizing, arguing, correcting, and opposing. All we are doing is boxing with shadows.

The consequences of making error real

To summarize what I've just covered, we make errors real by *looking* for, *attending* to, *interpreting*, and *correcting* them. To do this is "to react to them as if they were real" (T-9.III.6:7). Indeed, we make them real if we "react *at all* to errors" (T-9.III.4:1; emphasis from original dictation).

What are the consequences of making error real? I'm sure there are many, but the star consequence, mentioned over and over by the Course, is *making our own errors real*. Note these passages, in which I have retained the original emphasis and wording:

If you perceive his errors and *accept them* [as real], you are accepting *yours*. If you want to give *yours* over to the Holy Spirit, you must do this with *his*. (T-9.III.5:2-3)

Your brother is as right as you are, and if you think he is *wrong* you are condemning *yourself*. (T-9.III.5:6)

Your brother's errors are not of him, any more than yours are *of you*. Accept his errors as real, and you have attacked *yourself*. (T-9.III.7:1-2)

Do not let any belief in its [error's] realness enter your minds *at all*, or you will also believe that you must *undo* what you have made in order to *be* forgiven. (T-9.IV.5:4)

Though the principle behind this is not really stated, we can easily surmise it: Any truth that applies to my brother must also apply to me. If one and one equals two for him, then one and one must equal two for me as well. And if his errors are real, then mine must also be real. How could his errors be real while mine are just illusions? Therefore, a decision about what is real in him is *simultaneously* a decision about what is real in me. This idea is forcefully stated and specifically applied in personal guidance Helen received about the psychological testing she and Bill were doing:

As you see him you will see yourself. Whether this be through the use of psychological tests, or by making judgment in some other way, the effect is still the same. Whenever you have judged anyone, it is impossible for you not to make this judgment on yourself. If you see one of your brothers, who happens to be a patient, as exhibiting signs of a thought disorder, then you will experience this same disorder in your own perception.

Here we have the same principle—what is true for your brother must also be true for you—but it is given an almost shocking application: If you perceive someone as having a mental disorder, you will experience that same disorder *inside you*. As extreme as this sounds, it's not at all far-fetched, as anyone who has taken abnormal psychology knows. When you learn about the mental illnesses of other people, you begin to suspect that you have those same illnesses yourself!

This is clearly a powerful motivator to not make our brother's errors real. Wouldn't it be wonderful to wake up one day and realize that all the mistakes we ourselves made, all the unkind thoughts we had and all the callous things we did, were not real, that they happened only in a passing dream? What freedom that would be! If the Course is right, that day will only come for us the day *after* we grant that same freedom to our brother.

How do we do this?

I think this idea of not making error real can easily sound hopelessly difficult. At this point, we might be thinking, "How can I possibly overlook my brothers' errors when they have such an impact on me?" Yet that, of course, means that we see those errors as having a real impact, and that means we have accepted their *reality*. Now our job seems to be to make something *real* somehow feel *unreal*. And that turns forgiveness into nothing more than an elaborate exercise in denial.

The key, it seems to me, is to accept that the errors really and truly are not real, that this is the objective truth and this is how the Holy Spirit sees things. As we saw before, "The Holy Spirit does not perceive his errors" (T-9.III.3:1). And since

the Holy Spirit sees things as they really are, those errors can't actually be there. They are nothing but fragments of a senseless dream. They only seem to have effects on us because we believe in the dream and thus have granted reality to its events.

What we have done, then, is take something that is unreal and make it feel real. In light of this, our task becomes much simpler than we may assume:

You have been told not to make error real, and the way to do this is very simple. If you want to believe in error, you would have to make it real because it is not true. But truth is real in its own right, and to believe in truth *you do not have to do anything*. (T-12.III.1:1-3)

Thus, we don't have to make the *real* seem magically *unreal*. We just have to *stop* making the *unreal* seem *real*. Specifically, this means to stop looking for errors, stop attending to them, stop interpreting them, and stop correcting them. By stopping these things, we leave errors exactly as they are: unreal. Strictly speaking, then, this is not about doing something. It is about *not* doing what we have been doing.

What we are aiming for, I think, is to develop a mental habit of overlooking errors from the start. These two sentences have struck me as key:

Forgiveness through the Holy Spirit lies simply in looking beyond error from the beginning, and thus keeping it unreal for you. Do not let any belief in its realness enter your mind. (T-9.III.5:3-4)

What this passage seems to advocate is having a mental habit whereby our attention automatically passes right through error, "thus keeping it unreal" for us. Now we are vigilant, not for errors, but for any belief in their "realness" entering our minds. Developing such a habit will need to be a very active process, in which we intentionally look past error and carefully police our minds for the belief in its realness. But eventually, this would become automatic and effortless. It would simply become the way we see the world.

What do we look past error *to*?

To look past error, though, we need to look past it *to* something. We can't look past it into emptiness. What, then, would we now be looking for and attending to? The Course mentions two things. The first is that person's "loving thoughts" or "good efforts":

Although you may have made many mistakes since then [since you invited Him into your relationship], you have also made enormous efforts to help Him do His work. And He has not been lacking in appreciation for all you have done for Him. Nor does He see the mistakes at all. Have you been similarly grateful to your brother? Have you consistently appreciated the good efforts, and overlooked mistakes? Or has your appreciation flickered and grown dim in what seemed to be the light of the mistakes? Perhaps you are now entering upon a campaign to blame him for the discomfort of the situation in which you find yourself. (T-17.V.11:3-9)

This passage asks us to see our brother as the Holy Spirit sees us. Just as He appreciates our good efforts and does not see our mistakes, so we should do the same with our brother. According to this passage, what we have been doing is letting our brother's mistakes outshine his good efforts, so that in the "light" of his mistakes, our appreciation for his good efforts has correspondingly "flickered and grown dim." But we can do just the opposite: let the good efforts fill our vision to the point where we don't even see the mistakes. What are these "good efforts"? They are clearly the same thing that is elsewhere labeled "loving thoughts":

To forgive is merely to remember only the loving thoughts you gave in the past, and those that were given you. All the rest [the errors] must be forgotten. (T-17.III.1:1-2).

These loving thoughts are not actually real, either, but they are this-world reflections of what is real. And that brings us to the second thing we see instead of error: the other person's true Identity. This lies beyond both the loving thoughts and the errors: "He overlooks the mind *and* body, seeing only the face of Christ shining in front of him, correcting all mistakes and healing all perception" (M-22.4:5).

Right now, we tend to see a person as a dull mass of errors, sprinkled with the glitter of a few scattered loving thoughts. And from this unsightly mass we naturally hold back the greater part of our love. Instead, we must develop the

habit of seeing that person as a radiant unearthly light, throwing off shining rays of loving thoughts and good efforts. We see this blazing light as “undimmed by errors” (W-pI.158.7:3). The errors are like clouds that seem to block out the light, but we can send our mind’s gaze right through these clouds, which, like the body, “will at length be seen as little more than just a shadow circling round the good” (T-31.VII.3:3).

When you have to deal with someone’s error

When you think about all this seriously, you realize there are times when you *have* to respond to an error, when looking past it and staying silent is just not helpful. The Course acknowledges this—in several places, actually—and it is very instructive to look at what it says.

In “The Unhealed Healer” (T-9.V), Jesus says it can be helpful for the therapist to bring his patient’s “nightmares into awareness” (T-9.V.3:1). But the reason to do this is not to treat their symbols as containing the secret to who the patient really is. Rather, the only reason is “to teach that they are not real, and that anything they contain is meaningless” (T-9.V.3:1).

The same section says it may help a patient for his therapist “to point out where he is heading, but the point is lost unless he is also helped to change his direction” (T-9.V.7:2). How does the therapist do this? He presents “an example of one whose direction has been changed *for* him, and who no longer believes in nightmares of any kind” (T-9.V.7:4). What helps the patient change his direction, then, is the example of a therapist who no longer believes in the reality of error.

Earlier, I mentioned guidance Helen received on psychological testing, which said that if you see a person as having a “thought disorder,” you will experience this same disorder inside you. That guidance said that you can neutralize the negative effects of doing this testing if you “recognize that you are *discussing only illusions*, and that this has no real meaning at all. Try to say a prayer for your brother while doing this and you will call forth and experience a miracle instead.”

In one place early in the Course’s dictation, Jesus devoted several pages to recounting Helen and Bill’s errors over the course of a day. But he very carefully framed this discussion so as not to make the errors real. He said it was not about the special significance of these mistakes: “There is nothing of special interest about the events described below, *except* their typical nature.” Nor was it about their dire results: “It is the process which is to be noted here, and not its results.” He also said the positive approach (focusing on what *to* do) was a “more constructive emphasis” than this focus on “what *not* to do.” For all these reasons, he said this was the only time he was going to do this sort of thing.

Finally, the Manual, in Section 17, describes how a teacher can correct his pupils’ “magic thoughts”—thoughts of finding salvation through false means. He needs to realize that if he gets angry at the magic thought, or even faintly irritated at it, he has made it real. This will mean he then has a “double wish” (M-17.2:4), a wish to help and a wish to hurt. This in turn will arouse the pupil’s resistance, and the two will join in a battle of wills, with the pupil hanging onto his error and the teacher trying to wrestle it from him. The teacher instead needs to realize the pupil’s magic thought is not real. This will unify his mind behind a single wish—the wish to help. When the pupil sees that all his teacher wants is to help, this will unify *his* mind so that all *he* wants is to receive that help. Now the two are pulling in the same direction, and the teacher can then give his pupil the answer he is asking for, the one that will enable him to leave his error behind:

The single aim of the teacher [the wish to help] turns the divided goal of the pupil [to receive help and to resist it] into one direction, with the call for help becoming his [the pupil’s] one appeal. This then is easily responded to with just one answer, and this answer will enter the teacher’s mind unflinching. (M-17.3:5-6)

These five situations have a great deal in common. Notice that all of them are about helping someone else. As part of this, you are having to deal with that person’s errors—bringing them to awareness, pointing them out to him, helping him correct them. And this would typically entail making those errors real. So to keep from doing that, you handle the situation in a very conscious way. First, inside yourself you see and embody the unreality of error. In particular, you do not identify the *person* with the *error*. You see the person as real but the error as unreal. You recognize, in other words, “that you are *discussing only illusions*.” Second, on the outside, you handle things in a way that communicates this. You somehow let the other person know that you aren’t seeing his errors as real. That’s what Jesus did in saying, “I’m just pointing these out as *typical* examples of a *process* you want to outgrow, not as special events with dreadful results.” And that’s what the teacher did by showing the pupil that all he wanted was to help and by waiting until the pupil asked for that help.

So there are times when we have to deal with the errors of someone we are trying to help, which would seem to imply that they are real. But it is possible to deal with them while simultaneously believing and conveying that we are “*discussing only illusions*.”

Conclusion

What makes forgiveness seem so hard is that, having made our brother's error real, we seem to be faced with the task of making the real suddenly feel unreal. "You conceive of pardon," the Course says, "as a vain attempt to look past what is there; to overlook the truth" (W-pl.134.3:2). And this just seems unnatural. It seems like plain, old-fashioned denial, against which our minds naturally rebel.

Wouldn't forgiveness be easier if we remembered that we have in fact taken something unreal and artificially made it feel real? If our own mental energies have conjured this illusion, all we need to do is stop the conjuring. All we need do is stop *looking* for error, stop *attending* to it, stop *interpreting* it, and stop *correcting* it, and we will find that forgiveness has of its own accord opened its petals within us.



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

Robert Perry. *He is the author or co-author of over twenty books and booklets, including Path of Light: Stepping into Peace with 'A Course in Miracles'.*

CIRCLE MAILBOX

The following is feedback we've received on Greg's article in A Better Way #109, "Breaching the Wall of Pain."

How helpful, Greg — your ability to integrate Biro's work and thoughts with the Truth of the Course. It provides a clear path for me in dealing with emotional pain as well as the physical kind that so grips and gets the immediate attention. To witness one's pain and simultaneously the Christ Light is to hold each one on her journey home to God as already Home.

— Diane Butler

• • •

Thank you for your article on "Breaching the Wall of Pain." Your presentation of Biro's position was clear and well organized, and like you, I can see some practical value in his idea of learning ways to communicate the pain to reduce the sense of isolation. I did appreciate how you were able to point out the similarities and differences between Biro and the Course. I especially appreciated this point about the difference between the two: for Biro our undesired pain leads to isolation; for the Course our desire for isolation (separation) leads to pain. I believe this article is a good example of a contribution to developing a tradition of Course scholarship.

— Robert J. Hellmann M.A.

A Better Way moves to bimonthly

We enjoy the chance to bring you our latest perspectives on the Course to you each month in *A Better Way*. However, due to our many teaching duties, we also have made the difficult decision to relax the monthly publishing schedule. Therefore, we will be moving to a *bimonthly* publication of *A Better Way*, starting with the next issue, which will therefore come out in April. If you would like to share with us any thoughts you may have about this, we would appreciate hearing from you, and your feedback will certainly influence our thoughts about the future.

Love Cannot Be Compromised: The Heart of *A Course in Miracles*

A one-day workshop with Robert Perry

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We are happy to announce our first live workshop in Sedona in several years. Robert Perry will be visiting Sedona from England to present a day-long workshop on the very backbone of the Course's thought system. He will follow the single idea that love cannot be compromised through various permutations as it explains the source of our suffering, the nature of God, the nature of forgiveness, and how extending forgiveness to others leads to true forgiveness of oneself.

Many of these ideas will put a new slant on the Course for even long-time students. This workshop is a preview of a new educational program to be offered in the near future by our Circle-trained teachers at various locations in the U.S. and Canada.

We hope you will join us for this important day!

Watch our website for registration details, or call Amy at the Circle Office at 928.282.0790 to register over the phone.

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>.