



CONTENTS

Individual Responsibility	
or Communal Responsibility:	
What Would the Course Have	
Us Emphasize?	
<i>by Greg Mackie</i>	1
Circle News	6



# A BETTER WAY

## Individual Responsibility or Communal Responsibility

### What Would the Course Have Us Emphasize?

by Greg Mackie

I've been thinking a lot lately about the relationship between individual responsibility (our responsibility for ourselves) and communal responsibility (our responsibility for others). These thoughts have been spurred in part by the current political debate between conservatives emphasizing the individual side in the form of individual freedoms, limited government, and unregulated capitalism; and progressives emphasizing the communal side in the form of social justice, government's responsibility to serve the common good, and a social safety net.

But this is not a political piece; rather, it is about a broader issue that transcends politics. The relationship between individual and communal responsibility is something we wrestle with every day. Do I take care of myself first, or do I put others first? Is it better to give something to the panhandler, or is it better to withhold it to teach him a lesson in personal responsibility? Do I let my kids learn from their mistakes the hard way, or do I bail them out? Am I a self-made man, or does it take a village?

So, the relationship between individual and communal responsibility is not just an abstract problem for philosophers, but is of great practical import. If we are students of *A Course in Miracles*, the crucial question then becomes: What would the Course have us emphasize? Should we focus more on the individual side or the communal side? The answer to this question is crucial because it forms a major component of our basic stance toward life. It will influence virtually everything we do. So in this piece, I want to share my thoughts on how I believe the Course would have us answer this vital question.

First, let me define my terms in a bit more depth. By "individual responsibility," I mean the idea that by and large, we are individually responsible for the condition of our lives; we cannot blame outside forces like other people or society for the state we are in. Since individual responsibility is so crucial, we have no obligation to help others; in fact, placing too much emphasis on helping others is actually detrimental, because it leads to their dependency. What we should do is improve our lives through our individual effort and encourage others to do the same. Through individual empowerment, a better world will emerge.

We see this broad perspective in the American ideal of rugged individualism, in the idea that individual moral choices are responsible for the ills of the world, in a "law and order" stance that emphasizes the personal responsibility of law-breakers, in laissez-faire capitalism, and in sayings like "God helps those who help themselves." In its extreme form, this perspective can become a ruthless "every man for himself" stance that rejects any notion that we have a responsibility to anyone but ourselves.

By "communal responsibility," I mean the idea that by and large, our community and environment are responsible for the condition of our lives; outside forces influence our lives to such an extent that we cannot significantly improve our condition through our efforts alone. Since communal responsibility is so crucial, we shouldn't place too much stress on strictly individual efforts to improve our condition; in fact, placing too much emphasis on individual responsibility is detrimental, because as long as the external conditions that mold our lives are unchanged, individual effort is doomed to

## PUBLISHED BY

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](mailto:info@circleofa.org)

Website: [www.circleofa.org](http://www.circleofa.org)

Bookstore: [www.circlepublishing.org](http://www.circlepublishing.org)

## SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

*A Better Way* is published monthly by e-mail. If you wish to subscribe, please visit our website.

## CIRCLE OF ATONEMENT

is a nonprofit, tax-exempt corporation dedicated to *A Course in Miracles*. It was founded in 1993. Its publishing division, Circle Publishing, was founded in 2003.

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Robert Perry

Nicola Perry

Greg Mackie

Rick Baker

## THE CIRCLE'S FINANCIAL POLICY

As stated in the *Psychotherapy* pamphlet: "One rule should always be observed: No one should be turned away because he cannot pay" (P-3.III.6:1). If there are any of our materials or services that you want but cannot afford, please let us know, and give whatever you can.

## THE CIRCLE'S REQUEST

You can have a profound effect on our ability to extend Jesus' vision of peace, love and understanding into the world and in assisting the implementation of the Circle's Financial Policy.

The Circle is supported entirely by your purchases and charitable gifts, and we ask you to look within to see if you might be led to support our vision financially with a donation (any donations are tax deductible). We encourage you to give not in payment for goods or services received, but in support of our work and outreach.

## MAILING LIST POLICY

The Circle will share its mailing list on request with other *A Course in Miracles* organizations, using our discretion and being sensitive to guidance. If you do not want your name shared in this way, please let us know and we will ensure it is not.

## 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.

## REGULAR CLASSES ♦ SEDONA, AZ

Daily Morning Workbook Class

Weekdays, 10:00- 11:00 am EST

For information e-mail

[workbook@circleofa.org](mailto:workbook@circleofa.org)

## REGULAR CLASSES ♦ PORTLAND, OR

Weekly Classes

With Allen Watson

In-depth study of the Workbook of

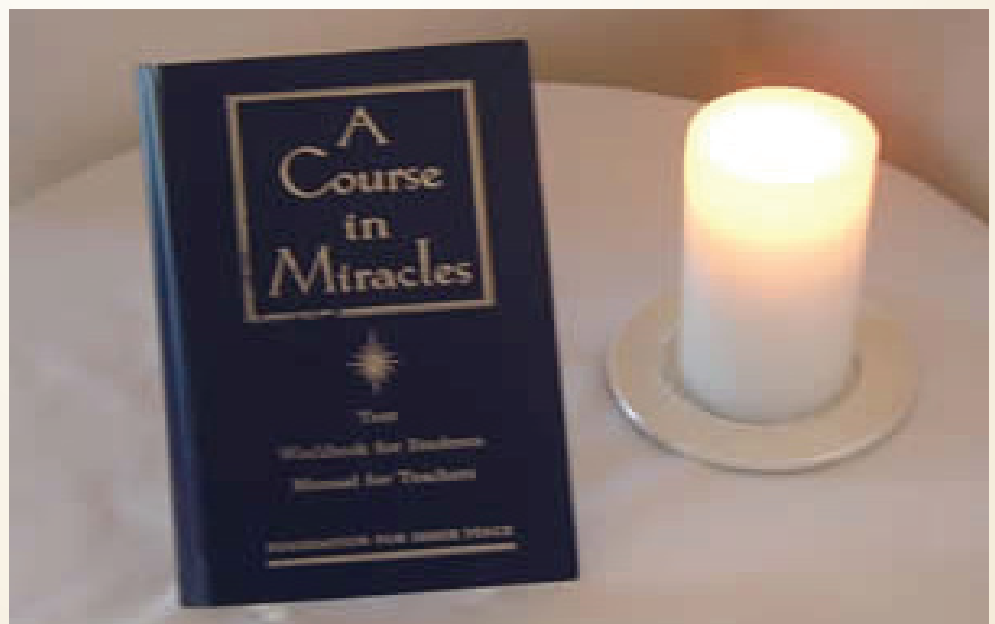
*A Course in Miracles*

Tuesdays, 10:30am - 12:30 pm

Thursdays, 7:00pm - 9:00pm

Contact Allen Watson

[allen@circleofa.org](mailto:allen@circleofa.org) - (503) 916-9411



futility. What we should do is work to improve the lives of others through service to those hurt by those external conditions, and through social activism aimed at changing those conditions. Through communal service and activism, a better world will emerge.

We see this broad perspective in the American history of social justice movements like the civil rights movement, in the idea that “the system” is responsible for the ills of the world, in a stance that emphasizes the social conditions that lead to crime, in charities and programs (both government and private) to help the poor and disadvantaged, and in sayings like “I am my brother’s keeper.” In its extreme form, this perspective can become a despairing “We’re all helpless victims of the system” stance that rejects any notion that we have real power to improve our individual lives.

Obviously, the definitions I’ve just given are, to a certain extent, caricatures of these positions. Actual human beings generally don’t fall on one side or the other all the time; most people acknowledge that both individual and communal responsibility are real, important, and necessary. The most fervent libertarian acknowledges that no man is an island and helping one another in some form is an essential aspect of life. The most committed social activist acknowledges that individual choices make a huge difference in the conditions of people’s lives. In practice, I think we all realize that real-life situations involve some combination of individual and communal responsibility, and we bring both perspectives to the table when trying to work things out.

However, I think people tend to *emphasize* one perspective or the other. They tend to look at life primarily through the lens of one perspective, seeing the other as secondary. I think we all intuitively understand this. If you think of particular people in your own life, your mind will probably automatically assign them to one camp or the other. While you’re almost certainly stereotyping them to some extent when you do this, at the same time you’re likely to be roughly accurate. If you know them well enough, they’ve probably already made it clear to you where they’re at.

Indeed, you can see the clash between individual and communal emphasis everywhere you look. For example, not long ago I served on a jury in a criminal trial. The defendant in this trial likely did commit at least one of the crimes he was accused of, but he also likely had a mental illness that influenced what he did. And what I saw was that the jury was divided in terms of which aspect a juror emphasized. One contingent emphasized the mental illness and regarded it as a sufficient mitigating factor to justify a “not guilty” verdict. The other contingent emphasized that the mental illness was “not an excuse,” and therefore pushed for a “guilty” verdict. Both sides acknowledged that both the crime and mental illness existed, but they differed on whether the communal responsibility to have mercy on the mentally ill or the defendant’s individual responsibility for committing the crime was primary.

That brings me to the title question of this piece: Given that both individual responsibility and communal responsibility are important, which is most important from the perspective of *A Course in Miracles*? Which one is primary; which one should we emphasize? I’ll give my answer first, and then explain why I came to this conclusion. In short: I think that in the Course’s view, we should emphasize individual responsibility in our stance toward *our own lives*, and emphasize communal responsibility in our stance toward *other people*. Hopefully, what I mean will become clear as I proceed.

Let’s look at the two aspects of this answer one at a time, starting with the Course’s emphasis on individual responsibility for our own lives. This is an idea well known to every Course student; in fact, it is by far the main emphasis in the Course community, at least when it comes to what people profess. We’re all aware of Course passages which declare that *all* of our thoughts, *all* of our emotional states, and *everything* that happens to us are the results of our individual decisions. For instance, look at these passages:

*I am responsible for what I see.*

*I choose the feelings I experience, and I decide upon the goal I would achieve.*

*And everything that seems to happen to me I ask for, and receive as I have asked.*

Deceive yourself no longer that you are helpless in the face of what is done to you.

Acknowledge but that you have been mistaken, and all effects of your mistakes will disappear.

It is impossible the Son of God be merely driven by events outside of him. It is impossible that happenings that come to him were not his choice. His power of decision is the determiner of every situation in which he seems to find himself by chance or accident. (T-21.II.2:3-3:3)

It is your thoughts alone that cause you pain. Nothing external to your mind can hurt or injure you in any way. There is no cause beyond yourself that can reach down and bring oppression. No one but yourself affects you. There is nothing in the world that has the power to make you ill or sad, or weak or frail. But it is you who have the power to dominate all things you see by merely recognizing what you are. (W-pI.190.5:1-6)

This is individual responsibility on steroids. Regarding our individual lives, not once does the Course say to us, “The world did it to you. Your body did it to you. Society did it to you. Your parents did it to you. Your ex-husband did it to you.” All of the Course’s ideas and practices are geared toward helping us recognize that “I am not the victim of the world I see” (W-pI.31.Heading). As we think of ourselves, then, we should be thinking, “I do not blame anyone for my condition. I am a child of God, and I have the power to choose what to think, say, and do. My life conditions and my happiness are in my hands.”

Yet there is a whole other side to the Course that I think is much less recognized by Course students: our communal responsibility toward other people. Even though the Course affirms that each of us is responsible for our individual lives, it never says, “That guy over there is responsible for his life, you can’t do anything about it, and you shouldn’t try.” On the contrary, the Course strongly affirms that while, strictly speaking, we cannot *cause* the conditions of others, we have tremendous *influence* on them. True, my thoughts, words, and actions can’t overrule others’ power of choice, but I can “reinforce errors they have already made” (T-1.III.5:9). This power to influence and reinforce is truly immense; in fact, the Course tells us:

The power of the Sons of God is present all the time, because they were created as creators. Their influence on each other is without limit, and must be used for their joint salvation. (T-6.I.18:1-2)

We saw individual responsibility on steroids earlier; here we see communal responsibility on steroids. Our influence upon each other is so powerful that it is *without limit*. Given this immense power, we *must* use our influence on others on behalf of our joint salvation. As Spider-Man always says, with great power comes great responsibility. So, along with all those passages about our individual responsibility toward our own lives, we see numerous passages about our communal responsibility toward our brothers:

Everyone teaches, and teaches all the time. This is a responsibility you inevitably assume the moment you accept any premise at all, and no one can organize his life without some thought system. (T-6.In.2:2-3)

You have assumed your part in [your brother’s] redemption, and you are now fully responsible to him. Fail him not now....His salvation is your only purpose. See only this in every situation, and it will be a means for bringing only this. (T-17.VIII.5:5-8)

The power to heal the Son of God [your brother] is given you because he must be one with you. You *are* responsible for how he sees himself. (T-21.VI.7:4-5)

Whenever you are with a brother, you are learning what you are because you are teaching what you are. He will respond either with pain or with joy, depending on which teacher you are following. He will be imprisoned or released according to your decision, and so will you. Never forget your responsibility to him, because it is your responsibility to yourself. Give him his place in the Kingdom and you will have yours.

The Kingdom cannot be found alone, and you who are the Kingdom cannot find yourself alone. (T-8.III.5:8-6:1)

Do not withhold salvation longer. Look about the world, and see the suffering there. Is not your heart willing to bring your weary brothers rest?

They must await your own release. They stay in chains till you are free. They cannot see the mercy of the world until you find it in yourself. They suffer pain until you have denied its hold on you. They die till you accept your own eternal life. (W-pI.191.10:6-11:5)

The message is clear: We have a profound responsibility to use our powerful influence upon our brothers’ minds in a way that helps them change their minds, and thus contributes to our joint salvation. In fact, a major reason that we are to apply such rigorous individual responsibility to our own minds is *so that* we can prepare ourselves for fulfilling our communal responsibility of releasing other minds: “It is essential...that you free yourself from fear quickly, because you must emerge from the conflict if you are to bring peace to other minds” (T-2.VIII.2:8).

Put another way: We accept our individual responsibility to free our own minds so we can fulfill our communal responsibility to free others’ minds by *working miracles for them*. As the early dictation of the Course put it, we need to hold ourselves in a state of “miracle-mindedness” so we can fulfill our function of “miracle-doing” for our brothers. This is, after all,

a course in miracles. We are meant to spend our entire lives serving our community of brothers through extending healing miracles to them: “Each day should be devoted to miracles” (T-1.I.15:1). We are to shift their minds both through the example of carefree invulnerability we set, and through words and acts of kindness and love. Our goal is to reach a state of being where every aspect of us is fully devoted to this joyous task: “My eyes, my tongue, my hands, my feet today have but one purpose; to be given Christ to use to bless the world with miracles” (W-pII.353.Heading).

Working miracles is not simply some happy but irrelevant by-product of fulfilling our individual responsibility for our own lives; fulfilling this communal responsibility to our brothers is the only way we ourselves can awaken from the dream. As one of the passages above says, fulfilling our responsibility to our brothers ultimately is fulfilling our responsibility to ourselves. We cannot find the Kingdom alone. It is only by giving our brothers their place in the Kingdom that we find our place in the Kingdom.

So, to restate my answer to our title question: I think we should emphasize individual responsibility in our stance toward our own lives, and emphasize communal responsibility in our stance toward other people. But I want to stress that what I’m speaking of here is a matter of *emphasis*. I’m not suggesting that we should banish any thought of communal influence on our own lives, or of others’ individual responsibility for their lives. Acknowledging communal influence on my own life is an acknowledgement of the oneness of the Sonship. Acknowledging the individual responsibility of others for their lives is an honoring of their power and (especially if I am in a teacher-pupil relationship with them) a way of helping them make better choices.

I’m simply saying that we should use individual responsibility — “My life condition is due to my choices” — as our primary frame of reference for our own lives, and communal responsibility — “I am here to be truly helpful to my brother” — as our primary frame of reference for our interactions with others. How exactly we mix the two perspectives in any individual situation is something we should turn over to the Holy Spirit.

This all sounds very abstract. How does it work in a real-life situation? Of course, to really bring this perspective to every aspect of our lives in a deep and lasting way, we need to walk to path of the Course day by day. But I think we can take an important step toward embodying this perspective simply by reminding ourselves of it frequently, making it a regular part of our thought process as we live our own lives and engage with those around us.

Think, for example, of how this might be applied to a romantic partnership. What I’m suggesting is that as we consider our own thoughts, feelings, and actions in such a relationship, we should emphasize individual responsibility, which would look something like this: “I am responsible for my thoughts, feelings, words, and actions in this relationship. I can’t blame my partner for what I’m experiencing. It’s not her fault. I’m not justified in getting angry with her. True, she does have a powerful influence on me, and it may be appropriate at times to talk with her honestly about some of the ways her thoughts, words, and actions impact me. Done in a kind way, it could actually be helpful to her for her to know how she impacts me. But I don’t want to make that the focus. Above all, I need to do my own work to take responsibility for my own condition here.”

Conversely, we should emphasize communal responsibility in our interactions with our partner, which would look something like this: “I love her, and I am here to be truly helpful to her. I want to use the powerful influence I have on her to heal her mind. I want to be courteous, kind, loving, and forgiving to her. I want to focus on all she is doing to help make the relationship work, rather than fault finding. I want to help her to be happy. True, she does have individual responsibility for her own thoughts, feelings, words, and actions, and it may be appropriate at times to talk with her honestly about some of the ways she is sabotaging herself. Done in a kind way, it could actually be helpful to her for her to know how she might choose better in certain situations. But I don’t want to make that the focus. I don’t want to look down my nose and say ‘What did you do to create that?’ whenever she has a problem. Above all, I need to work miracles for her, to be of loving service to her, to give her her place in the Kingdom so that I can discover mine.”

Can you imagine what our lives would be like if everyone adopted a stance like this? I think this combination of individual responsibility for ourselves and communal responsibility for others would transform our world. One reason I think it is so powerful is that it is the exact opposite of the ego’s stance. Let’s face it, whatever our formal positions on this issue, our egos all pretty much work the same way. When it comes to our own problems, we appeal to communal responsibility: “You hurt me. You’re to blame. It’s all your fault. I never would have done that if you hadn’t...etc.” But when it comes to others’ problems, we’re very quick to appeal to individual responsibility: “I didn’t hurt you. I’m not to blame. It’s all your fault. Your life is your responsibility. You made your bed; you have to lie in it...etc.” Of course, we usually don’t put things quite this crassly. But isn’t this the underlying message behind so many of the “nicer” ways we try to position ourselves as the victims and other people as the responsible ones?

And I have to say, I think both the “every man for himself” school and the “we’re victims of the system” school have serious problems when used as exclusive (or nearly exclusive) ways of viewing human relations. The first perspective can breed a kind of callous indifference to the needs of others, providing a convenient rationale to look out for number one and not help other people. The second perspective can become a disempowering stance that locks people into a vic-

tim mentality. Focusing too exclusively on one perspective (and angrily dismissing anyone who points out the virtues of the other) gets us nowhere.

It seems to me that the dual perspective I'm advocating here offers the best of both worlds: authentic empowerment for the individual combined with selfless service to others. It strikes me as the basic stance taken by some of our greatest heroes and saints. When I think of people like Jesus, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr., I see people who both steadfastly refused to see themselves as victims, and were committed to helping others who were negatively impacted by the oppressive social systems around them (in part by empowering those others not to see themselves as victims any longer either).

Therefore, I think that a stance in which we emphasize individual responsibility toward ourselves and communal responsibility toward others, if done with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has the potential to reverse the ego in a fundamental way. I think this is a big reason why the Course itself takes this stance. Let us, then, really give this a try. I think that as more and more people take this stance, we will see "miracles fall like drops of healing rain from Heaven" (W-pII.13.5:1) upon our tired world. And we will bring the day closer when, through both our individual and our communal responsibility, we will awaken from the dream and return to the God Who alone is responsible for all that is true, good, and beautiful.



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

### Gathering in Sedona and retreat in St. Louis

On the weekend of April 8-11, 2011, we had our first Circle Course Community (CCC) gathering in Sedona. Twenty-three of us were there. Many came from all over the country (including two from Alaska), several came from Canada, one from Mexico, and even one from the United Kingdom (Robert!).

The gathering began on Friday night with a social time at the Circle house. Greg called it "a reunion of people who had never met." Towards the end of the evening, Robert and Veronica paid tribute to Andre Gendron for his years of devoted service to the Circle. (Andre stepped off the board at the beginning of this year.)

Saturday, Robert led a workshop that was open to the public, held at the sanctuary at Unity of Sedona, with 65 registrants. Titled "Love Cannot Be Compromised: The Heart of *A Course in Miracles*," it was designed to be a four-session overview of the Course's thought system. This, in turn, is planned to become the basis for an introductory course that we intend to train teachers to present. So Saturday was not only our first workshop in Sedona in years, it was also a test-run of an event we hope will be reproduced many, many times. The day had a wonderful feel and feedback was very enthusiastic.

On Sunday, our CCC members gathered again at the Circle house for the bulk of our CCC gathering. It was a truly lovely day. We began with reading the day's Workbook lesson and then having a nice half-hour meditation together. Then we shared about how various projects within the CCC are going. These included the Teacher-Pupil Initiative, Circle Advisors, the Scholarship Project, the Prayer Ministry, and the Workbook class. After a Southwestern lunch, we reconvened and talked about the training for the intro course. Then we heard about the activities and experience of community at the Circle's first (and, for now, only) satellite: Course Oasis in Ottawa, Canada, run by Mary Anne Buchowski. Finally, we all sat and listened for, and then shared, guidance that would be helpful for the CCC, particularly about how we can build community more effectively and how we can manifest our vision for the future.

The next day, Monday morning, the teachers who were present from the Teacher-Pupil Initiative and the Workbook class had a chance to gather once more in the morning, to discuss plans for the future.

The CCC gathering was a smashing success, and we are already talking about the next one.

The following weekend, April 15-17, the St. Louis ACIM Council hosted a retreat with Robert Perry, Allen Watson, and Greg Mackie. It was billed as a reunion retreat for Allen and Robert, as they had presented there a number of times in years past. The event was titled “A Day in the Life of a Miracle Worker” and drew heavily on the vision of the miracle worker in the early part of the Text, including many personal stories drawn from Helen’s early notes. The retreat was sold out at 85 registrants. It felt like a powerful weekend, as participants got in touch on a personal level with a vision of being a miracle worker that was fresh, yet also grounded in the Course’s earliest material.

## CIRCLE MAILBOX