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A BETTER WAY

Could the Course Community Actually Be United?

by Robert Perry

I think Course students are generally troubled by the array of different interpretations of *A Course in Miracles*. And why wouldn't we be? It leaves us confused, not knowing which of the many interpretations to believe. And it leaves the Course community feeling like a dysfunctional family; less like a patch of Heaven on earth and more like the fractured battleground we are trying to rise above.

You can see our discomfort with these differences, I believe, in all the ways in which we try to minimize them. I often hear that in fact there are no actual disagreements, just different ways of expressing the one truth. Or that the differences are only about theory, which is irrelevant since the Course says, "theoretical issues but waste time." Or that different people hold different parts of the same puzzle. Perhaps the most common one I hear is that we should affirm everyone's point of view and should never, under any circumstance, discuss differences, since that's always nothing more than competitive ego-jousting. À la Bill Thetford, rather than get caught up in disagreement, we should just "tear out the page."

What I hear behind all of this somewhat desperate "differences don't matter; they aren't real; it's all good" is an unspoken yearning: "I wish we were one." Clearly, we are uncomfortable with the differences, which implies, of course, that we would prefer they not be there. Can we just admit that? Wouldn't it be great if the Course community was actually unified? I am not talking about an artificial, enforced unity. I'm talking about a truly healthy unity, where everyone freely agrees, not on every detail, but on the broad strokes of what it means to understand and follow this path.

The notion of a unified Course community reminds me of those experiences that Helen had in which she suddenly "got a sense of everyone walking happily and very much together on the same path" (*Absence from Felicity*, p. 156). On one occasion she said, "A sudden sense of deep emotional closeness to everyone there swept over me, with a clear and certain recognition that we were all making the same journey together to a common goal" (*Absence from Felicity*, p. 128). These two experiences are, of course, applicable to everyone, but there was one experience Helen had that seems specifically applicable to the Course community. She had a memory of being an ancient priestess who, with Bill as her intermediary, served as a conduit for divine blessings to those who looked to her. This role was in essence repeated in her role as scribe of the Course. Therefore, the image she had of those who received her light *then* seems like an ideal for those of us who receive it *now*: "The valley was filled with a huge column of people marching joyously together in rows that seemed to extend endlessly in both directions."

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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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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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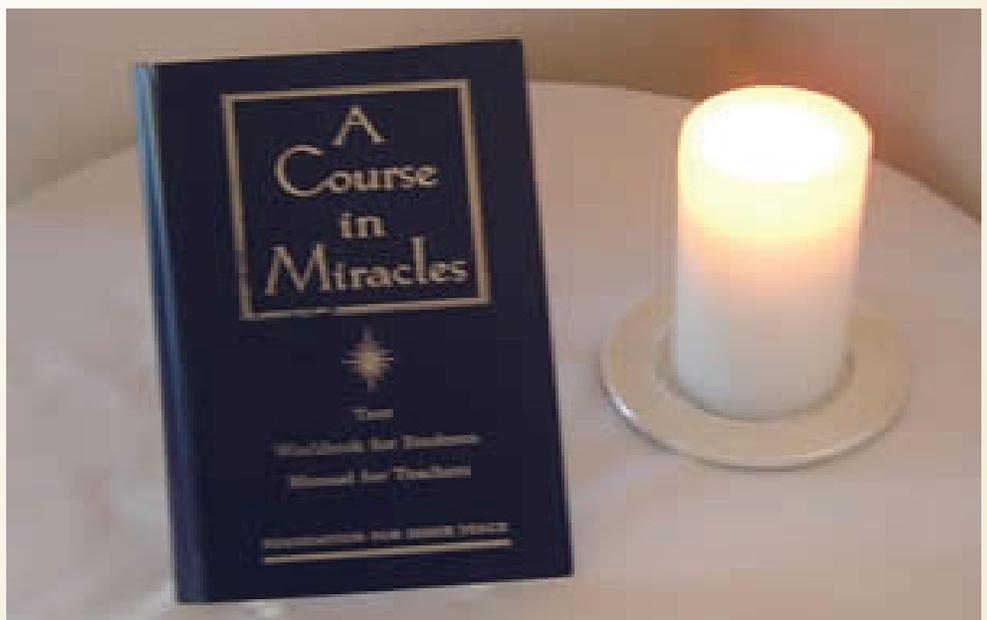
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Contact Allen Watson

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



Just try for a moment to picture this image actually fitting the Course community. Imagine that wherever you turned—study groups, conferences, newsletters, ACIM books—you felt you were part of a united column walking joyously together. Imagine being at a Course conference and having “a sudden sense of deep emotional closeness to everyone there” sweep over you as you had a certain recognition that we are “all making the same journey together to a common goal.” Who of us wouldn’t want that?

We could have that. There is a way to get there. I realize this sounds impossible, but I’m convinced it is not. Let me tell you about another community, centered on another teaching, that is not burdened by varying interpretations. Principally in the 1960s and 70s, a Jewish woman in New York channeled a set of high spiritual teachings. These declare that our unhappiness stems from a distorted picture of reality, which is rooted in our unconscious. We therefore need to delve beneath our conscious masks to bring our hidden, destructive beliefs to light, and heal them with God’s help. These teachings laid out a practical path for doing just that, one that also emphasized the importance of human relationships, of living our lives according to divine guidance, and of establishing a personal relationship with Jesus.

I could be describing *A Course in Miracles*, but I am actually describing the Pathwork, which was channeled by Eva Pierrakos from 1957 to 1979. I have carried a deep respect for the Pathwork for 25 years, since I read the first book that came out, *Guide Lectures for Self-Transformation*. Recently, I realized that in all that time I had never gotten the impression that there were actually different interpretations of the Pathwork. Everyone seemed to see it in basically the same way.

I decided to check out this impression, and wrote the main Pathwork organizations. The administrator of the Pathwork Foundation, Zoe Willow, kindly responded and confirmed my impression:

Yes, I think people more or less understand the Pathwork in the same way. The lectures [the Guide lectures, which are the teachings channeled by Pierrakos] stand for themselves as very universal teachings.

I received the same answer from Kent Peterson, MD, President of the Board of Trustees of Sevenoaks Retreat Center and Mid-Atlantic Pathwork:

I personally have found remarkable consistency and compatibility among the teachers and teachings of Pathwork. Questions of interpretation always bring us directly back to the Pathwork Guide Lectures, which encourage each reader to discern the truth for him/herself in a style that invites inquiry and seldom sounds like dogma. As a result I have found people challenging the Guide [the source of the teachings] and disagreeing with “Him/Her/It/Them” from time to time, but have not personally witnessed any striking differences among teachers’ views of the Pathwork.

Kent went on to say that he has noticed different emphases between teachers (Zoe referred to these as well), which he chalked up to the “wide variety of issues, approaches, subjects, topics, etc. from within this body of work.” He also said there have been interpersonal conflicts that have at times split the community, but that, to his knowledge, “they have not concerned different views of the teaching of the Pathwork Guide.”

The picture of the Pathwork community that comes through in these responses is not pie-in-the-sky. Like everyone else, they have their conflicts. But one thing they do *not* have is a variety of different interpretations. Instead, on that level, there is “remarkable consistency and compatibility.” How can this be? Kent’s answer is telling: “Questions of interpretation always bring us directly back to the Pathwork Guide Lectures, which encourage each reader to discern the truth for him/herself in a style that invites inquiry and seldom sounds like dogma.”

That, I think, is the key: Questions of interpretation bring them *back to the teachings themselves*, where the questions are solved by a non-dogmatic approach that emphasizes inquiry and discernment.

Could this be the answer for the *Course in Miracles* community as well? I believe it is the answer. Before I expand on this, we do need to acknowledge some key differences that make their situation easier in this respect. First, the Guide lectures are more plainspoken than the Course. Second, Pierrakos conducted hundreds of question-and-answer sessions over twenty years in which members of the community received direct clarification from the Guide. Because we conspicuously lack those features, our situation is admittedly far more difficult. However, the basic principle still applies: Questions of interpretation can be resolved by turning to the channeled teachings themselves with a non-dogmatic approach of inquiry and discernment.

This sounds so obvious that surely we do this already, right? I'm sorry to say that, in my experience, we don't. Indeed, I think our values as a community typically lead in the opposite direction. First, we tend to place a tremendous emphasis on the idea that the Course has no single meaning; that instead, it means whatever it means to each individual. Second, we are taught to treat the interpretations of influential teachers with great delicacy, being careful not to voice disagreement lest we violate Bill's injunction to "tear out the page."

Thus, with both our personal interpretations and the interpretations of teachers, it seems that we should never label them incorrect. Rather, they should always be treated as sacrosanct. We should affirm they all have value; they work for that individual; they help that teacher's students. If someone's spiritual journey has been served, who are we to say that an interpretation is wrong? If someone felt guided in an interpretation, who are we to say we know better?

This clearly strikes a spiritual-sounding note. Yet however loving and respectful it may sound, it is not hard to see how it leads directly to the bewildering diversity we find ourselves mired in right now.

It is also not hard to see that this deprives the Course itself of the power to establish what it teaches. In this approach, once an interpretation has been arrived at, the Course has no power to overrule it. The book itself becomes virtually impotent. And it must remain so, for what besides the book poses a greater threat to the right of every interpretation to be correct? Therefore, the larger that right looms in our eyes, the smaller the book itself must become, to keep that right uncompromised.

Yet think about it: The book is our one rallying point and our one potential unifying force. When we disempower it, we lose our only hope for unity. In contrast, we *could* allow the Course to unify us in the same way that the Guide lectures have unified the Pathwork community.

Perhaps we automatically assume that this equals giving up the freedom to have our own opinion. But in speaking of this freedom, we can mean two entirely different things. We can mean our right to simply hold a view, to the point where we do not let anyone or anything tell us we *can't* hold that view. Or we can mean our faculty of rational inquiry whereby we weigh the evidence and come to a reasoned conclusion.

What we need to do, I believe, is *minimize* the former freedom so that we can *maximize* the latter one. In other words, we need to stop caring so much about the views we hold now, or about the views held by Course authorities. Those views may be right, they may not. Our role is to remain unattached. We don't care if tomorrow those views are superseded by a better view, a more complete view, a deeper view. We don't care if tomorrow we reevaluate the evidence and see that we had clearly gotten it wrong.

Instead, we are on a search for truth, and in that search, our eyes are on the evidence—in this case, the words of the Course—not on our own opinions. And as we rub up against that evidence, we will naturally find that our opinions

change. Some will fall away. Some will be strengthened. Some will be refined. Some will deepen. The process will often be uncomfortable. It may at times even feel humiliating, as when we realize we were unambiguously wrong about something. But unless we are fully willing to be proven wrong, even *happy* to be proven wrong, and fully willing to admit it ourselves and voice it to others, then our search for truth will slow, perhaps even stall. The idol of personal opinion will have been chosen over the goal of truth.

I am talking as if this is an individual search, but it would ideally be a community-wide search as well, in which we collectively seek to understand what the Course teaches. On this journey, we would value interpreters, but in a different way than we do now. They would carry weight not according to their claims of spiritual authority, but *according to their accountability to the evidence*. And we would take their findings not as authoritative pronouncements, but as interesting possibilities to be weighed on the scales of our own encounter with the evidence. Imagine one big, community-wide conversation, without name-calling, without acrimony, and without having to tip-toe around sacred cows. Imagine us collectively trusting that we are all more committed to the truth than to our own opinions.

Such a community, I believe, would naturally unify, simply because the Course itself is clear. And if that clarity was our focal point and our measuring stick, it would naturally draw us into itself, so that its light would become our common space.

True, this is a long-term goal. The other approach—that each person’s opinions are sacrosanct—is admittedly entrenched. Yet each one of us has the power to move all of us closer to this goal. What, then, do you think of this idea? Do you want to be part of a unified Course community? Would such a community better support your own progress on this path? If so, you might take a moment and reflect on how you might use this approach more often yourself, how you might give the Course power to correct and refine your own views. You might also think of ways in which you could gently encourage other Course students you know (friends, your study group, etc.) to do the same.

If enough of us do this, perhaps we really *can* unite as a Course community. In principle, there is nothing stopping us from taking all our differences to the Course itself and coming together in its clarity. There is nothing stopping us from becoming a community in which, to use Helen’s words, everyone is “walking happily and very much together on the same path.”



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 NEWS

The Illuminated Text Volume 4

We are very excited to announce the publication of our latest book! *The Illuminated Text* by Robert Perry and Greg Mackie is a multi-volume series drawn from our extremely popular online Text Reading Program. With numerous requests to publish in book form we have finally done so, and Volume 4 is available to [buy now](#) for just \$16.95!

Why an illuminated Text? The Text is the foundation of A Course in Miracles. Doing the Course is simply a process of learning and internalizing its thought system, and the Text is where that thought system is laid out. It is an unparalleled spiritual tour de force. Careful study of it will change your outlook in ways that perhaps nothing else can.

Many students, however, find the Text to be very hard going, and wish they had a deeper grasp of what they were reading. *The Illuminated Text* will guide you, in detail, through the Text, enabling you to get a deep understanding of this spiritual masterpiece. Each Course paragraph is first presented, and this is followed by detailed commentary. Material that was edited out of the Course is included where it is relevant and clarifying, and there are exercises, from Robert and Greg, for practical application.

You won't want to miss these extremely helpful volumes. It will eventually be a seven-volume series, and as we mentioned, Volume 4 has just been released, and can be [purchased](#) for \$16.95!