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# A BETTER WAY

## ***Should the Course Community Actually Be United?***

### **An Introduction and Response to the Responses to “Could the Course Community Actually Be United?”**

**by Robert Perry**

In the last issue of *A Better Way* (#113), I wrote an article entitled “Could the Course Community Actually Be United?” and invited responses. I was very pleased to receive a virtual avalanche, possibly more than we’ve ever received for any newsletter article. There are many newsletters to which we don’t receive a single word in response. So to suddenly receive ten thousand words was really nice.

Clearly, the article touched a nerve. I felt this was visible not just in the volume, but also in the *pattern* of the responses. Right after the newsletter came out, I got a raft of mail saying that differences are irrelevant, or inevitable, or even positive; that it’s important that we all do the Course in our own individual way. This overall response came so quickly that I wondered if people felt a need to just get it off their chest.

Then, when you normally expect interest in a newsletter issue to die down, more positive responses started coming in. People expressed a longing for the kind of unity I spoke of and a desire to be part of the kind of project I suggested, “in which we collectively seek to understand what the Course teaches.”

That fact that so many people on both sides really wanted to be heard on this suggests to me that this is a major unhealed issue in the Course community. If the response to this article is any indication, the community as a whole is deeply ambivalent about its lack of unity.

In this article, I’d like to respond to those responses that said the Course community either *couldn’t* or *shouldn’t* be united. On the idea that it couldn’t be united, readers pointed out that “there has never been a community on earth that was completely unified,” and that “no other spiritual document of any major or minor spiritual path or tradition” has been “singularly understood.”

This really struck me as odd, because the centerpiece of my article was the example of the Pathwork community, in which there is “remarkable consistency and compatibility among the teachers and teachings of Pathwork,” as one of its leaders put it. The community is not completely unified, of course, but it has the particular kind of unity that I was calling for: unity of interpretation.

Without that living example, I felt the article was probably not worth writing, as I pictured people saying we could never achieve that kind of unity. What seemed odd to me was that even *with* the example, people *still* said this, as if the example wasn’t even on the page. In fact, out of all the responses I received, only one of them even mentioned the Pathwork. I had hoped the Pathwork example would cause people’s imaginations to fire, yet I’m left with the impression that it didn’t even cause neurons to fire.

An even deeper challenge to my thesis were those responses that denied that a united community was a desirable goal. The general idea here seemed to be that it’s important that we each approach the Course in our individual way. It’s up to the individual to understand the Course, and it’s up to the individual to apply it. Those who do this will realize that differences don’t matter, and will get in touch with a unity that transcends form. To seek a common interpretation of the Course’s words—which, after all, are just “symbols of symbols”—“smacks of dogma,” and is “just an intellectual argument based on our perception of separation, specialness and conflict.” And to seek a joining on the earthly level is “to

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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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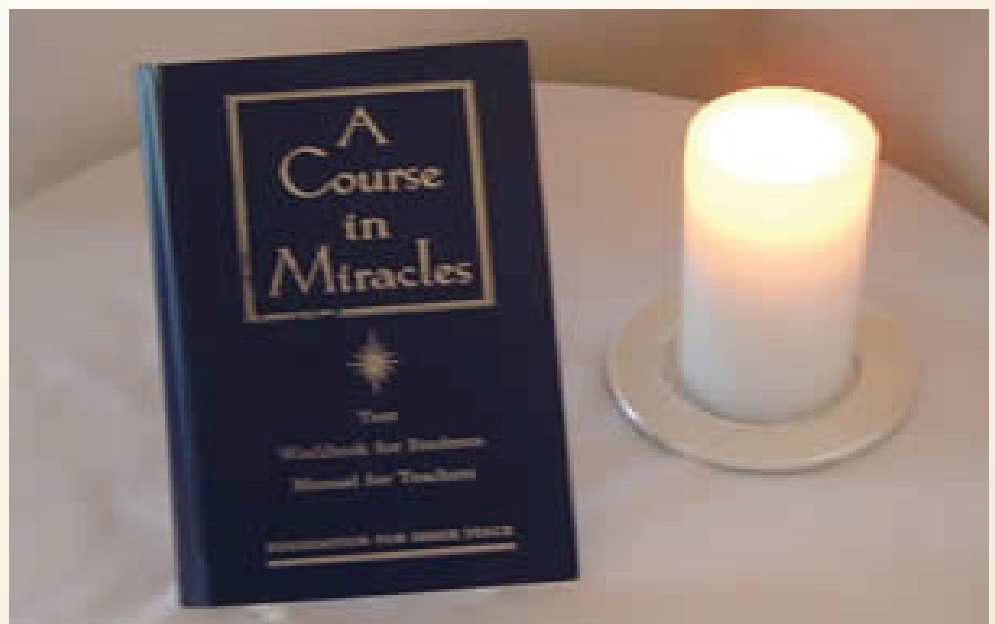
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form a special relationship.” It is only human to want such a joining, but it is not something the Course itself encourages in any way.

If true, this obviously completely undermines my entire point. But is it true? To try to answer that question, I’d like to attempt an experiment in exactly the process I was suggesting. My suggestion was that to resolve differences of interpretation, we turn to the Course itself and have a group conversation about what the evidence from the Course indicates. So let’s have that conversation. Should the Course community be united? I’ll offer the evidence I see in the Course and invite you to dialogue with me about it. Three points emerge for me out of that evidence:

## 1. Jesus wants us to interpret his words accurately, to receive what he meant by them

Despite how widespread the idea is that we should each interpret the Course in our own individual way, I cannot find any place in the Course that actually advocates this. If I knew of such places, I would mention them here, but I don’t.

On the other hand, I know of many indications that Jesus wants us to interpret the Course *his* way, to take away the particular meaning he was trying to convey. I’ll arrange those indications into four points.

First, Jesus says that he has spoken to us very clearly in the Course: “I have made every effort to use words that are almost impossible to distort” (T-3.I.3:11); “This is a very practical course, and one that means exactly what it says” (T-8.IX.8:1); “This course is perfectly clear” (T-11.VI.3:1).

Second, he frames us as prone to misinterpret the Course, due to our resistance to his teaching. After saying that “this course is perfectly clear,” he adds, “If you do not see it clearly, it is because you are interpreting against it” (T-11.VI.3:2). After stating he’s made every effort to use hard-to-distort words, he says, “but it is always possible to twist symbols around if you wish” (T-3.I.3:11). He warns of us misinterpreting Lesson 196 (“It can be but myself I crucify”), “because the ego, under what it sees as threat, is quick to cite the truth to save its lies” (W-pI.196.2:2). Clearly, he sees us as frequently misinterpreting his words to further our ego’s agendas and thwart his. There is an interesting vignette in Helen’s early notes where Jesus claims that Bill has done this exact thing and then adds, “But this sort of thing happens all the time.”

Third, he urges us to resist the temptation to distort his meaning, by instead reading and interpreting very carefully. With one of the miracle principles, he told Helen and Bill, “*Be very careful* in interpreting this.” In the last section of the Manual for Teachers, he says the same thing about one of his ideas there: “Do not read this hastily or wrongly” (M-29.7:3). In regard to an early section (that did not make it into the FIP Course), he urged careful rereading as a way to guard against misinterpretation: “The section on psychic energy should be re-read very carefully, because it is particularly likely to be misinterpreted until this section is complete.”

Fourth, if we can actively resist our ego’s attempts to distort his words, we will not only come away with accurate understanding, we will actually teach ourselves that we are not an ego. After warning that the ego may try to cite Lesson 196 “to save its lies,” Jesus says the following:

Yet must it fail to understand the truth it uses thus. But you can learn to see these foolish applications, and deny the meaning they appear to have.

Thus do you also teach your mind that you are not an ego. For the ways in which the ego would distort the truth will not deceive you longer. (W-pI.196.2:3-3:2)

This passage says it all. Our ego will try to “distort the truth” of his teaching, thus failing to understand that teaching—i.e., reading it wrongly. But we can learn to spot the ego doing this and “deny the meaning” it seeks to inject into the Course. And by doing this, by actively overruling the ego, we teach ourselves that we are *not* an ego. That’s quite a plug for accurate interpretation of the Course!

All in all, I don’t see Jesus encouraging us to interpret the Course our own way. Rather, I see him urging us to resist the ways we would individually distort the Course, so that we can interpret it *his* way. If you see indications in the Course that tend in a different direction, please let me know and we’ll talk about them.

## 2. He wants us to join with each other

Is it me, or have Course students become rather suspicious of the whole idea of joining? The sense I get from many students is that joining with others grants reality and power to the external world, so that we become at the mercy of other people. Instead, we should join with them inside our own minds, rather than seeking a mutual joining, a joining *between* them and us, for that would be a special relationship.

It’s remarkable how difficult it is to find this perspective in the Course. What the Course actually says is unambigu-

ously pro-joining. True, it speaks negatively about special relationships, the ego's alliances, and the union of bodies. But its criticism of all these things is that *they are not real joining*. They are separation dressed up as joining. For example: "The union of bodies thus becomes the way in which they would keep minds apart" (T-15.VII.11:6), and "An unholy relationship is no relationship. It is a state of isolation, which seems to be what it is not" (T-20.VI.8:3-4).

In place of this pseudo-joining, the Course, as you might expect, advocates real joining. What is real joining? It is joining with another in a common goal or common purpose, so that both people hold that same goal or purpose. "Only a purpose unifies, and those who share a purpose have a mind as one" (T-23.IV.7:4). Even though sharing a purpose usually results in bodily cooperation, it is fundamentally a matter of the mind: "When two minds join as one and share one idea equally, the first link in the awareness of the Sonship as One has been made" (T-16.II.4:3).

We have a number of concrete images of this joining in the Course. The Text (Chapters 17-23) talks at length about Helen and Bill joining in the common purpose of living out "a better way," saying to them, "You *are* joined in purpose" (T-17.V.14:7). The Manual talks about a teacher and pupil "who join together for learning purposes" (M-2.5:3). The *Psychotherapy* supplement speaks of "a union of purpose between patient and therapist" (P-2.II.5:4). *The Song of Prayer* speaks of people who come together to pray—"those who join in prayer" (S-1.IV.2:4).

The Course, then, is talking about really joining with another person, a joining that is fundamentally between *minds*, but will naturally result in *physical* cooperation. After all, this joining is all about seeking a goal together, and how do we seek a goal together while operating completely separately and independently? This quote from the Workbook should put an end to any idea that the Course is not talking about actual, physical cooperation between individuals:

Salvation must reverse the mad belief in separate thoughts and separate bodies, which lead separate lives and go their separate ways. One function shared by separate minds unites them in one purpose, for each one of them is equally essential to them all. (W-pI.100.1:2-3)

As I said, I see the Course as profoundly pro-joining. It speaks openly and repeatedly, in abstract ideas illustrated by concrete examples, of people sharing a common purpose and thus operating together—*co-operating*. If any of you see something different in the Course, please show me your evidence, show me the actual passages, and let's discuss it.

### 3. He wants us all to join in one interpretation of his words

This final point is perhaps a surprise, but it also follows quite naturally from the first two points. If Jesus wants us to interpret the Course in the way he meant it, and if he wants us to join our minds together, then it is quite natural to think that he wants us to *join in his interpretation of the Course*. Can you picture him saying, "I really want you to join with each other, and I really want you to hold my interpretation of the Course, but I do *not* want you to join in my interpretation of the Course"?

Is there any overt support for the idea of uniting in one interpretation of the Course? Actually, there is. A passage in Chapter 6 in the Text begins by saying that being vigilant against your mind's sickness is the way to heal it, after which your mind naturally teaches healing. It then goes on:

This establishes you as a teacher who teaches like me. Vigilance was required of me as much as of you, and those who choose to teach the same thing must be in agreement about what they believe. (T-6.V(C).9:8-9)

Notice that last line: "those who choose to teach the same thing must be in agreement about what they believe." Rather than trying to say something bold and original here, I think Jesus is just referencing a truism. *Of course* those who teach the same thing must agree about what they believe. Imagine that you have a history class taught by two teachers, and one teaches you about the Holocaust and the other denies there *was* a Holocaust. What a confusing class that would be!

This kind of situation seems to be a real concern of Jesus, as he mentions the same basic scenario a chapter later. He speaks of a curriculum that "is planned by two teachers, each believing in diametrically opposed ideas." The result is that "each one merely interferes with the other" (T-8.I.5:5-6). Based on this, we can only imagine what he thinks of the current Course scene!

In the above passage, of course, Jesus uses this general idea—that teachers teaching the same thing must agree—to make a more specific point, that we as teachers need to agree with him, our head teacher: "This establishes you as a teacher who teaches like me." If we combine this specific point with the general idea, we get a striking picture: He wants those who teach *A Course in Miracles* to be in agreement with *each other* because they are all in agreement with *him*.

Is it possible that that's what Jesus really wants? It would be nice to have more direct evidence. Is there anywhere



that Jesus speaks specifically about how he sees the Course community? Actually there is, in guidance Helen received after the Course was complete. There, he does talk about the Course as a movement in the world, though what he says bears no resemblance to what exists now.

I am speaking of guidance Helen received on the last day of 1975. In this guidance, Jesus speaks of the Course growing “from infancy into a helper of the world”—becoming, in other words, a major contributor to the healing of the world. Then he outlines how he sees it reaching that point:

It will grow slowly, because nothing can be permitted to go wrong. It must develop without error, and with nothing to mar its perfect purity. It is the Word of God, to be kept holy forever.

This time there will be no failure, no loss of truth, no misunderstanding and no misinterpretation. I will direct its growth as it reaches from the paper on which it was written into the hearts for which it was intended.

Here we have a long list of things that must not “be permitted” to happen. But as far as I can tell, the entire list is mainly referring to one thing: *misinterpretation*. Some of the items are unmistakably about that, and the rest naturally suggest that or lend themselves to that reading. Let me start from near the end and show you what I mean.

Obviously, “misunderstanding” and “misinterpretation” here refer to mistaken interpretations of the Course. That’s not in question. It’s also safe to say that “loss of truth” is about that, too. The truth expressed by the Course is lost when that truth is misunderstood. To talk about “the Word of God” being “kept holy” is also almost certainly the same idea. That frames the Course as a scripture whose purity must be honored, rather than tainted with unholy ideas about it. That is clearly the same exact same idea as “with nothing to mar its perfect purity”—what mars its purity being impure understandings of it. And finally, that must be what he means by “without error”—“error” must refer to errors in how the Course is understood. What the passage means, then, is something like this (I have put my words in boldface):

**The Course** will grow slowly, because nothing can be permitted to go wrong. It must develop without error **in how it is understood**, and with **no misinterpretations** to mar its perfect purity. It is the Word of God, to be kept holy forever, **untainted by unholy understandings**.

This time there will be no failure, no loss of truth (**rather, its truths will be found**), no misunderstanding and no misinterpretation. I will direct its growth as it reaches, **straight and undistorted**, from the paper on which it was written into the hearts for which it was intended.

The final result of carefully examining this passage can be something of a shock. In this one place at least, Jesus’ whole concept of how the Course should grow in the world revolves around one priority: “no misinterpretation.” That is why it should grow slowly, so that in a wild gallop out to the masses it does not become seriously misrepresented and misunderstood. As it reaches from mere words on paper into living, beating hearts, it must not get lost in translation. There must be a pure beam of undisturbed light that shines directly from the *paper* into the *hearts*. For “this time” it must be different. We all know what happened *last time*, the last time he came to teach us. The teaching got immediately distorted, until it became hopelessly misunderstood. But this time, he wants things to go differently. “This time there will be no...misunderstanding and no misinterpretation.”

As I write this, I myself am kind of shocked. The Course community implied by the above passage is so radically different than what exists today that even I find it a bit jarring. I have grown accustomed to the way things are, and so I’ve been framing it as a mere distant ideal for us all to join in Jesus’ interpretation of the Course. But what I hear him saying is, “No, that is the central priority around which I have built my whole plan for the Course’s growth in the world. Above all else, it must develop without error.”

Perhaps I’ve read the passage incorrectly. Yet I really think I have been fair to each part and to the whole sweep of it. Another option: Perhaps Helen was hearing incorrectly when she received this. This, of course, is always an option, but what strikes me is that this guidance sounds very much like the Course passages we looked at earlier. When it comes to Course interpretation, Jesus wants us to be in agreement with him. And if he wants that on an *individual* level, why wouldn’t he want that on a *collective* level?

All of which leaves me with one question: How could we have gone so far off track? How could we have formed a Course community that looks nothing like what he envisioned? How could we have made “this time” look so much like *last time*? The one morsel of comfort I see is what he says right after the part I quoted:

Be comforted by this: It will be impossible to make any mistakes in its [the Course’s] connection which

will endure. I am watching over it with all the care I have for all my brothers in salvation. I understand what it can do for them, and I will make sure that it does it, and does it perfectly.

I *am* comforted by this. If I believe the first part, that above all else the Course must “develop without error,” then I must also believe the next part, that Jesus is watching over it, and that it really is “impossible to make any mistakes in its connection which will endure.” That is something I can hang onto, and will.

## Conclusion

Should the Course Community be united? Here are the conclusions I have come to based on an examination of what the Course says:

1. Jesus wants us to interpret his words not in our individual way, but specifically the way he meant them.
2. He wants us to unite with each other.
3. He wants us to unite in his interpretation of his words.

I have concluded, in other words, that he does indeed want a united Course community, more so than I realized.

As I have said, I'd like to have a dialogue about this. Please give me your reasons from the Course for differing with what I've said, or agreeing with it, or being on the fence about it. What evidence do you see in the Course? Many will naturally see this as a call to engage in a fight. But we can instead undertake it in the spirit of these words from Jesus to Helen and Bill (from what is now T-7.II): “Whenever anyone can listen fairly to both sides of *any* issue, he *will* make the right decision.” Indeed, Jesus speaks in exalted terms about searching for truth together:

Yet when two or more join together in searching for truth, the ego can no longer defend its lack of content. The fact of union tells them it is not true. (T-14.X.9:6-7)

Joining together in the search for truth is an ego-transcending pursuit, a holy act. What can we lose by doing something holy together?



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## SACRED EXCHANGE

*Amy Speach is our wonderful Office Manager. She will be writing this “Sacred Exchange” column in each issue of A Better Way to share her experiences on the path.*

### **Sacred Exchange: A Place of Peace and Gratitude**

**by Amy Speach**

Two years ago, on a Saturday evening just before Christmas, I finally followed through on something I'd thought about doing for years, but kept chickening out on: I volunteered at the hospice home where my mom had died. Since her death in the spring of 2002 (which was also about the time the Course came into my life), I'd been drawn to hospice work. It was partly because I was grateful for the care my mom had received, and how helpful that was to my fam-

ily during a time we were feeling grief-stricken and helpless. And it was also because, as a new Course student, I felt a growing appreciation for the philosophy behind hospice care: that the focus isn't on trying to prolong life or hasten death, but on doing everything possible to provide for the physical and emotional comfort of the person who is dying and those who love her.

Until that weekend, though, I had never actually shown up for duty. I would get just so far in the process of applying to be a volunteer—getting a tour, filling out an application, registering for training, signing my name on the schedule to shadow a more experienced volunteer—and then at the last minute I got nervous and backed out. In fact, I almost did the same thing again that time. I was originally scheduled to go in the previous week, but called in sick that afternoon with a bad cold. (That's another indication of how much I feared showing up: I went so far as to make myself physically ill to avoid going!)

Finally, though, I realized there was more at stake than whatever help my presence could offer the residents and families being cared for at the hospice home. Clearly, something in me was called to contribute to the work being done there. And something else in me was equally eager to have me avoid it. That something else actually seemed to be thriving on the conflict and inconsistency in me, perceiving it as evidence of my untrustworthiness and weakness, my inability to make a difference in a hurting world.

What inspired me to finally follow through on my commitment to volunteer was all I'd been learning in the Course and through Robert's classes in our Circle Course Community about the miracle impulse: that it is in our nature to give, and that our happiness depends on honoring that natural impulse. So I told myself that yes, I was afraid, but it was important to go anyway. It was important to go with an open mind and a willingness to give what I was able to give, and just let the experience teach me about itself, and about me.

As a fellow Course student, you can probably guess what I'm going to say about the three hours I spent at that hospice home on a snowy December evening: that although I thought my being there was all about learning what I had to give to others, I ended up being on the receiving end of a gentle healing experience that brought me to a place of peace and gratitude.

The hospice residence was set up like a home, with two wings of eight private bedrooms. Each wing had a kitchen, a living room, and a small chapel. The place was really lovely—very homey and cozy. The volunteers weren't responsible for the residents' medical or physical needs; there were two nurses on each wing to take care of them in that way. What the volunteers did was basically keep the place neat and well-stocked, and provide a cheerful presence for the residents and their visitors.

During my evening shift, we made a simple supper and checked in with the residents to see if they wanted what was on the menu, or if there was something else that appealed to them. And when family members stopped in the kitchen for a glass of ginger ale or a dish of pudding or to have a little cry, we showed them where to find the ice, the straws, the spoons, and the tissues.

I was teamed with a man named Jerry, a kind and funny retired teacher who had been volunteering there for years. He took great care in mentoring me in such tasks as emptying the trash and preheating the oven, and he cautioned me against misplacing anything in Sister Ann-Marie's pantry (which I think may have literally been arranged alphabetically).

Ideally, there were two volunteers in each wing for every shift, although that night there was just one man, a history teacher named Dave, working in the other part of the house. The two guys instantly joined in a friendly competition over whose kitchen was cleaner, whose dinner trays were better prepared (Dave did his wrong, Jerry assured me), and whose residents had healthier appetites. It was sweet.

Our side of the house was pretty quiet. There were six residents, but only three of them were eating, which I quickly understood to mean that the others were very close to death.

Three things stood out for me that evening as particularly sacred. The first was being asked by Jerry if I would mind tidying up the already immaculate chapel—a small room with a stained glass window, an altar, a few chairs, and a bookcase. I welcomed what seemed to me a prayerful task, watering plants and dusting the nativity scene in that holy space that was gently lit with white Christmas lights.

The second was bringing dinner to one of the residents: a lady named Jenny, who shared that her seventy-second birthday was coming up soon. (She pointed out the injustice of the fact that people who have birthdays near Christmas get robbed of their fair share of presents all their lives!) Jenny, who had lived much of her life in a home for developmentally disabled citizens, seemed not to be ill at all, and wandered about chatting with anyone willing to listen, telling her life story. One of the decorations in her room was a bulletin board with photos of her surrounded by people who obviously adore her. It didn't take me long to see why they do: She was delightful.

When I brought Jenny her oh-so-humble dinner of a hot dog and baked beans, she looked down at the plate, then

looked up at me with a confused expression. As I was getting ready to apologize for the meager meal and offer to make her something else, she said, to my surprise, “Just one?” Me: “Just one?” Jenny: “Where is my other hot dog? Can I have another hot dog? I haven’t had a meal like this in forever. It’s my favorite!”

The third thing that struck me as extraordinary that night was the strength and sincerity of a woman named Kathy. She was there visiting her husband Mike, a man in his fifties who was the dad of two and a lover of motorcycles, and who was dying of lung cancer. What struck me about Kathy was her joyfulness as she sat by Mike, chatting with him and with Jerry and me as if we were all at a holiday party rather than at her husband’s deathbed. I wondered if she fell apart when she went home without him at night, giving in then to the fear and sorrow she surely must have been feeling. I thought maybe not, though, somehow.

One other interesting and kind of strangely funny thing happened that night. As Jerry was taking the baked beans out of the oven, the fire alarm went off in the house. As you can imagine, that harsh sound was very disturbing in this otherwise calm and quiet place. One of the nurses quickly came to turn off the alarm, but the home’s peace had been unmistakably disturbed. It wasn’t long before the fire trucks arrived.

We learned not much later that Dave had forgotten to turn on the overhead fan while preparing the dinners on his side of the house, and had burned something. (Sister Ann-Marie would not be pleased, I fear.) Of course, Jerry got a kick out of that, because it made him the hands-down winner of their competition! We also learned later that one of the residents on that side of the house had died at the same time the alarm was going off. And in fact, when I left to go home at seven, a hearse was pulling up to the house—a somber sight that might have given me the creeps anywhere else, but was a commonplace occurrence there.

What dawned on me afterward is that maybe if Dave had someone else helping him the way I was helping Jerry, if there had been another volunteer there with him—one who hadn’t chickened out or conveniently come down with a cold, for example—then the distressing sound of that alarm might not have blasted through that tranquil place. The person who died at that moment would still have died, of course, but maybe he could have left this world accompanied by the sounds of peace and cheerfulness, not a siren of alarm, if someone else had mustered up the courage to follow through on her commitment and simply be there, like she said she would.

Not that I wanted to make that an opportunity to beat myself up. I didn’t. Because although it took me nearly eight years, I did in fact show up. I showed up as me, fear and doubt and hope and all. And just by being there, I helped.

It wasn’t until that Sunday morning that I realized my first volunteer experience at the hospice home had given me a miniature picture of what I hope my life will become as I continue to walk the path so lovingly laid out for us in *A Course in Miracles*: I want to help transform this world into a calm, tidy, and gently lit place where people who are hurting, including me, are made more comfortable by each other’s presence.

I don’t have a cure for lung cancer, and I can’t stop the alarm from sounding or the hearse from coming. But by God, I can boil you up a second hot dog if that’s your heart’s desire. I can dust off the baby Jesus in the chapel and move him a little closer to the light on the altar. And I can stand by your side in laughter or in prayer, witnessing your pain without adding to it, my own broken heart being mended in the process.



E-mail your comments to the author at: [amy@circleofa.org](mailto:amy@circleofa.org)

Amy Speech, the Circle’s office manager in Sedona, is a founding member of the Circle Course Community, a Circle Advisor, and a member of the Circle’s Prayer Ministry. In 2012, she will join the team of teachers offering the morning Workbook telephone class, and will be part of the first class of our new Teacher of Pupils Training Program, which begins in March.



## CIRCLE MAILBOX

*As Robert said in his lead article, we received an avalanche of responses to his article in A Better Way #113, “Could the Course Community Actually Be United?” Due to the volume of responses we received, we have not printed all of them, but have included representative examples.*

• • •

No, I strongly disagree that the ACIM community as a whole needs to find a common interpretation of the Course, if I’m understanding rightly that that’s what you’re saying. To me that smacks of dogma. The Course stresses that it is an individual study and that words are symbols of symbols and thus twice removed from reality. It’s only here to lead us to the Holy Spirit, who is the only one who can interpret it to us.

— Kathy Apodaca

• • •

Bravo, Robert Perry, on your recent article about whether the Course community could become united, and how that could occur. I have a Ph.D. from New York University in literary interpretation and research, and have taught in college and university English Literature departments for 44 years until my retirement. From that experience I can assert with confidence that you are correct: it is accountability to evidence that makes one interpretation superior to another. So yes, indeed, I would like to be part of a unified Course community, but it would be made possible only by all of us being willing to submit our private ego-preferences to calm clarifications that pay attention to context, grammatical constructions, parallelisms, consistent definition of terms, and so forth. The underlying question is this: do we prefer receiving accurate guidance, or do we prefer our own preconceptions? In other words, would we rather be “right” even when we might be wrong, or would we rather be peacefully happy because our guidance is accurate? Your work, and the Circle of Atonement generally, has been extremely valuable because of its careful handling of evidence concerning what the Course teaches. Thank you, and please keep up your efforts.

— Virginia Ramey Mollenkott

• • •

The idea of a Course Community might sound okay, but we need to remember there has never been a community on earth that was completely unified. Moreover I don’t see anything in the Course about a “Course Community,” although there is plenty about relationships and forgiveness.

As with everything else in this world there are going to be different viewpoints. This is inevitable. It is up to each of us to practice discernment ourselves and bring everything we think we know back to the Course. No community or external “authority” can remove this individual responsibility which the Course itself so clearly emphasizes.

From my own experience of writing and dialoguing about Course matters I don’t see any prospect of universal agreement about everything; and there doesn’t have to be. The emphasis of the Course is about the change of mind it is asking of each of us, not about authorities, interpretations, and universal consensus about Course metaphysics. This is a bottomless pit.

We have the authorities we need: the Holy Spirit, Jesus, and the Course itself. If each student brought his/her mind to the gentle correction of these, we would have no problems about unity. Unity would be right there.

— Mary Benton

• • •

Robert, thanks for the article “Could the Course Community Actually Be United?” and for the invitation to share my thoughts about it.

Yes, this is a subject close to my heart. I long for the type of community that I participated in when I was an active member of the Mormon Church. That closeness was not only a shared understanding of religious and metaphysical doc-

trine, but an environment where many of life's activities revolved around Church participation; this meant participation in church services (giving prayers, sermons, teaching, administering, etc.), visiting church members to give a spiritual message and see how they are doing, giving blessings, social activities, building close personal relationships, and where opportunities to serve one another were ever prevalent.

Although I see a lack of closeness within the Course community caused by different interpretations of the Course, I also see other larger challenges that prevent a united community. These include lack of an environment that would encourage not just doctrinal unity of some kind, but of loving, caring, sharing, and supporting one another. In thinking about this need, as I see it, I was prompted by the Holy Spirit to write down my thoughts about a local Course church (how it would function), and at least investigate if such a local church was even desired by the community or even feasible. It appears that there are only four people in the St. Louis Course community that are at least willing to talk about the idea. I anticipate a meeting of those people within a few months.

In my sharing of my ideas about a church (and therefore what I would consider a united Course community), I have found many challenges. A few Course students said that they would like to attend such a church, but presumably would not want to give public prayers or sermons or otherwise share the load of making the church a fellowship of those mutually committed.

Other Course students I have talked to give various reasons why a church would not work and why they would not want to be part of it; I think these reasons relate also to the challenges of uniting a Course community. They include:

1. One of the reasons that drew them to the Course was that there was no church organization involved; they wanted to get away from that.
2. The Course is meant to be a self-study course only, and it was not meant to be a church or any other type of religious or spiritual organization.
3. It would be too much of a commitment to have to actually become a member of such a church and be heavily involved in its programs and success.
4. Course related study groups provide the only structure (religious or otherwise) that is necessary for living the Course, and even they are not required; this feeling would, of course, see no need for Course "teachers."
5. There is no need to provide service opportunities (to be truly helpful) because the Holy Spirit will provide whatever is needed.

As I look at the Course community in St. Louis, I see fifteen or so study groups that each provide a great service to their members, particularly regarding learning the Course. However, for the most part, I see these groups as spiritual book clubs. They are nice places to attend when it is convenient, where there is no commitment, and where Course concepts can be discussed (probably the only place for some). But there is very little social activity, little celebration of life's major events (birth, death, marriage, coming of age, etc.), and little or no service provided by attendees to other attendees. These are the kinds of activities that would define a united Course community for me and which I think are essential for Course students to coalesce into something more than book clubs. As I see it, the putting aside of any differences of Course interpretation is only one facet of many that would have to be overcome to lead to some kind of meaningful and personal united fellowship among Course students.

— Jan Worley

• • •

I would think that we are all on the same page spiritually but not on the same page ego-wise. Even spiritually we are at different levels. If we could be in the spiritual "Now" we would be so peaceful, we wouldn't bother about our differences. They wouldn't be important. Sometimes we need to go beyond the intellect, and infuse ourselves with peace and love from the Source or God.

Everything is the truth at some level.

— Dorothy Kunz

• • •

It is funny that I received this issue in my inbox today, as I was having a debate over "perceived" differences with a Course friend and questioning this very thing. She seemed to believe differences have to exist and I felt that no one tried

long enough to get to the underlying issues....

I spent the last year in Temecula studying with Dr. Kenneth Wapnick because I was so tired of all the craziness that seemed to be passing off as ACIM. But if my memory is correct, I believe you split with him! And I remember reading your book *One Course, Two Visions* and feeling that the two of you were not *that* different—just the “emphases.” So...I certainly could join with you in this desire to seek a group where we are really willing to work on this together. I have been seeking that for years now. Yet, because of the split between you and Dr. Kenneth Wapnick, I also see how easily we decide we are “different”!

— Jean Weston

• • •

Having just read your latest *A Better Way* discussion, I commend your thoughts on uniting the Course Community. I have been a student of the Course for over six years. I find myself wandering in and out of the daily lesson routine after having completed it early in my studies. I would welcome a “uniting” movement that focuses on a single goal of finding truth and real vision.

— Henry Burgess

• • •

Thank you, Robert, this is just what I needed to hear right now.

Another thought came as I was reading. The author of the Course (which I believe to be Jesus) uses the medium of human language to impart a sophisticated spiritual curriculum. Whereas spiritual truths are of the Eternal and do not know change, human language is prone to change and multiple interpretations, even if differences are sometimes subtle. For example, the English of the Course is not the English of the King James Bible. The Course also has its own specific terms and concepts (e.g., “special relationships,” “magic thoughts”) which need to be understood in the context of the Course worldview. It is therefore understandable that among Course students, differences in interpretation occur. It does not mean that some people are “wrong” or that the Course is failing in its purpose. With that little willingness, we will all get there.

This applies to all churches, mosques, synagogues and temples, too. The truth still shines through all the dogma and squabbles about interpretation of holy books. All those who seek nothing but God will get there.

— Rowan Hagen

• • •

What I love most about ACIM is the personal journey it takes an individual on. There is no need to group or unify, for to create a group or unity is to form a special relationship. Your unified companions already exist—right outside your door (and inside too!). As the Course is based on psychotherapy, we can use this world’s psychotherapy as an example of unity and community. Basically there isn’t one!

You mention rational thinking to guide the community—who’s rational thinking? There is no rational thinking from an ego-based mind? Who would “set” the interpretation? If we had a “leader” who had gone beyond mind— well, that “leader” would not feel the need to unify and get everyone to march to the same beat, so to speak.

ACIM doesn’t call for groups and associations and rational thinking! In fact, it explains that we can’t use our mind to understand most of the teachings, instead we have to trust and request our miracles without full understanding if that is as the case may be. We are all on the journey anyway, it’s the same journey regardless of path chosen.

— SarahJayne Edwards

• • •

I loved the idea of being able to come together to agree what the Course means by studying it with open, humble minds. However, I suspect that on the level of form—a book that is read and interpreted by many different personalities with different brains—we will never find complete unity of thought or beliefs. I am not sure that this matters too much. For me, union, or true communion, can only be found when I tune my own consciousness into a much higher level— Christ consciousness, if you like. At this high level of consciousness, physical reality, with all its conflicting perceptions, begins to fade into insignificance, and only the true unity of pure, unconditional love and light remains.

So I'm not sure that I mind too much that we cannot always agree on the exact meaning of the Course—as this is just an intellectual argument based on our perception of separation, specialness and conflict. When I let all of that go, and open my heart and mind to Christ energy, I find that in that I am guided to rise above all temporary differences to see that we are all totally innocent and egoless, and that in Christ's light and love, we are all one— whether we intellectually agree with one another or not!

— Peggy-Jane Rogers

• • •

Thank you for your article on a possible Course community. I have thought for some time a world-wide and somewhat cohesive community would be of benefit to the Course as well as it's students.

As a member of AA, may I suggest a bit of study of AA's Twelve Traditions as well as Twelve Concepts for World Service. These two lists form what I consider the most egalitarian and democratic institutions ever achieved by humanity.

And one question: Have you communicated directly with other course teaching centers on this subject? Any positive replies?

— Lee Paulus

• • •

*Note from Robert: I sent the article around to several Course teachers, inviting their comments. Rev. Tony Ponticello from the Community Miracles Center posted it on the CMC On-Line Discussion Group, asking for responses, and then contributed his own response:*

Robert Perry poses the question in the title of his article, “Could the Course Community Actually be United?” The title question presupposes something very important, that the *Course* Community is **NOT** united. Robert Perry and I see this very differently. I do not see the disunited community that he does. The **Community Miracles Center** has run three large *A Course In Miracles* conferences in the past four and a half years (2007, 2009, 2010). All were well attended by students with every different *ACIM* theory interpretation. The **CMC** is currently enrolling for a large (*and what I believe will be a game changing, seminal event*) *ACIM* Conference in Chicago, IL in April of 2013 named “The Gift of Lilies.” Early enrollment has been terrific, 237 at this point and the conference is still 19 months away. Only a unified *Course* community would manifest this kind of support and this kind of attendance.

Robert believes that there are important differences in *ACIM* interpretation and that it is these differences that are causing the splintering of the community. I will agree with Robert about this, except that I don't think the splintering of the community is as profound as he sees it, but there **IS** some factionalizing and this factionalizing is something that we could, maybe even **SHOULD**, be talking about. Is it a problem? The entire world is a problem, so “yes” it is a problem. Can this “problem” be solved? Every problem can be solved, but we might not like the solution that we get. We may be so entrenched in how we see the problem that we may not recognize the solution when it is presented it us. As the *Course* tells us, the solution might not come down the “road” that we think it should come down.

“But do not make demands nor point the road to God by which He should appear to you.” (OrEd. WkBk.189.8)

After reading Robert's article twice, it appears to me that Robert is making the “demand” that the coming together of the *ACIM* community will happen when there is more basic agreement about *Course* theory. What I have solidly learned from my study of *ACIM* theory is when I perceive a problem that is troubling me, I have to totally let go of how I think the problem will be healed. I need to turn the problem over to the Holy Spirit and accept His answers and not mine.

I have been closely involved with the *ACIM* Community since I attended my first *ACIM* study group in 1981. That's 30 years, three decades. I became actively involved in a structured *ACIM* organization in that same year and facilitated my first *ACIM* study group in 1983. In 1985 I co-founded my first *ACIM* organization. In 1987, with Rev. Larry Bedini, I co-founded the **Community Miracles Center**. All the organizations I have been closely associated with have had as their purpose serving the needs of the greater community of *ACIM* students. By “greater” I mean our outreach was always much larger than our local geographic area. I would be what is called an “expert witness” about the *ACIM* community. I can in all humility say that there are only a handful of people who would have comparable knowledge, both



“public” knowledge and “insider” knowledge, of our community, its history, its key players—and most importantly—its rank and file “members.”

From my “expert witness” purview, I’d like to point out that there is a lot of agreement about basic *ACIM* theory. Here are some very agreed upon points of theory.

1) The world of time and space is an illusion of our own making. It is being projected from our unhealed mind. This is both our own mind and the collective mind because, in essence, there is no difference between my mind and the collective mind.

2) The *Course’s* focus is on a healing of the mind, because the mind is the cause of the problems we see. We heal our perception and from a healed perception we see a healed world.

3) We heal by offering up our troubling “misperceptions” to the Voice for God, the Holy Spirit, Who is in our minds. We must then let go of our misperceptions, wait for, and then embrace the new perceptions that the Holy Spirit brings to us.

4) Our personal relationships are the primary classroom where our healing work is done. Our misperceptions will show up most clearly in our relationships.

5) The healing of our relationships, by offering up our misperceptions to the Holy Spirit and embracing His new perceptions, is the process of *ACIM*-based forgiveness. Forgiveness is a key and fundamental process in *ACIM*.

6) In truth, we are a perfect, divine, eternal being of Love and Light. Our Divine essence is the Christ. The Christ is the creation of God as God created His creation, His Child. All our brothers and sisters that we encounter in the world are also the Christ in their true essence.

7) Since we were all created by God as an extension of God Himself, we are the same “substance” as God and have all the Divine qualities of God Himself. The only difference between God and ourselves is that God created us, and we did not create Him. God is first Cause and we are God’s effects. We do **NOT** recreate God when we all come back together (*this is actually a popular spiritual idea*). When we come back together we extend creation and create our own creations.

8) Jesus is in no way any different from ourselves. He is a brother like all other brothers. He is best thought of as an “elder brother” who learned what we are learning before us in time and is helping us learn what we are learning now.

I could go on, but the point I am trying to make is that there is almost universal agreement about many major theory points in all the schools of *Course* thinking. It is this agreement that does exactly what Robert thinks agreement should be doing. It is this agreement that allows us to join at conferences exactly like Robert says, “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.’” Possibly not “everyone” has this experience at the conferences we run, but it is my “expert witness” testimony that this is the experience of an overwhelming majority of attendees.

The *ACIM* teacher Ken Wapnick is the outspoken proponent of different theoretical interpretations from Robert Perry. This is no secret anywhere in the *ACIM* community. Robert himself has written about it. The **CMC** asked Ken Wapnick to be a presenter at the 2013 conference in Chicago. Ken Wapnick refused. The **CMC** asked Robert Perry to be a presenter at the 2013 conference in Chicago. Robert Perry refused. I want to be clear that the conference itself pays airfare, hotel costs, and conference meals for all presenters. What these teachers are refusing is a free trip to Chicago where they could present their views in open dialogue with other teachers who might have different views. Isn’t this just what Robert Perry says we need? If so, why did he refuse?

Robert told me that he just doesn’t do conferences. This does not match other facts. He **DID** do a conference in England about a year ago. Also, in this very article Robert talks about the importance of joining in conferences as a stated goal of *Course* unity. How does Robert match these facts with his refusal to come to the 2013 Chicago conference for free and present his views, possibly about the schism in the *Course* community, to the *ACIM* Community assembled.

Let me state clearly, the invitation to Robert Perry and Ken Wapnick to present at the conference still stands. Robert and Ken, please reconsider and come to the Chicago, 2013 conference, “A Gift of Lilies,” as a presenter.

If Rev. Tony were to call a reason why there is division in the *ACIM* community I would say that there is a division between those who **WANT TO JOIN** with fellow students and teachers and those who **DO NOT WANT TO JOIN**. Unfortunately both Robert Perry and Ken Wapnick are in the those who “do not want to join” category.

I do agree with Robert in spirit. We could greatly heal the divisions that do exist in the community. Those teachers/students who consistently refuse to join with others could shift. They could decide to join. They could come together in active relationship, practice forgiveness, and feel their true oneness with the whole community. This would be a great

example for students who see these teachers as leaders of the community.

I am asking Robert publicly:

“Do I want the problem, or do I want the answer?” (OrEd.Tx.10.78)

I want to end this post with a quotation from the end of Robert’s article. I wholeheartily agree with Robert here even if I, Rev. Tony, would come to this statement from an entirely different reasoning.

...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.”

*Robert replies:*

Tony,

I appreciate you posting my article on your forum. I was hoping for some constructive responses. But as you can imagine, I was disappointed by your response. My call for the community to examine itself and consider a possible path to unity became you publicly calling me on the carpet for being a prime cause of the community’s division, an example of what’s wrong with the community.

This may be hard to believe, but I actually am very community-oriented. That’s why, for instance, the Circle has always been a truly collaborate venture. Our board has never been a rubber-stamp board, but an alive group with different views. We’ve had a variety of teachers, almost all of whom already had their ACIM teaching ministries before joining the Circle. The relationship between those teachers has always been collegial and differences of interpretation have always been cooperatively resolved in the way I discuss in the article. Our current online community is a very healthy place, full of mutual trust. It’s a great place to be. My need for community is why I was heavily involved with Paul Ferrini in the early 90s when he undertook the one serious effort to unite the ACIM community. I went to his conferences (and helped convinced you to go when you were very uncertain about it), wrote for his magazine, stayed with him twice at his home, and spent weekly time with him on the phone as he tore his hair out over Course students wanting to stay separate. I learned a lot from that time.

So by temperament, I really want an ACIM community to call my own. But to call a community your own, you need to feel at home in it. That’s true of everyone. And, as I’m sure is obvious, I just don’t feel at home in the current ACIM community. The community that I would feel at home in is one that was really willing to challenge itself in its encounter with the Course, and therefore was willing to face aspects of the Course we’d like to avoid, such as the Course’s call for rigorous mental discipline; its huge emphasis on helping other people, on really joining with others in common purpose, and on having an active function in the saving of the world; its focus on the centrality of God; its call for teachers to act as Course mentors to personal pupils; and many other issues. The community I’d feel at home in would have high intellectual standards as well as high ethical standards. And it would be one where we could have real conversations about issues that matter, where we could openly face differences, and wipe them away by turning together to the Course. For a community to feel real to me, I need to have those conversations. But when I try to have them in this community, the conversation I want to have never happens, and instead it all somehow becomes about me. You’ve probably been in relationships like that, and it’s impossible to really come together in those conditions.

So, no, I am not going to attend the next conference. I made a mistake in breaking my “no conference” rule in London last year. I did already explain that to you, along with why I (mistakenly) made that decision, which makes me puzzled about why you used my attendance at that conference as proof that the reason I gave for turning you down was somehow insincere (given that it “does not match the facts”). As for dialoguing with Ken, I would of course dearly like to do that, but he’s refused me on that count for over 20 years.

I hope the conference is a genuine success, I really do. And I’m glad you’ve found a community that feels positive and even unified to you. The feedback I’ve received on my article so far suggests the community doesn’t see itself as unified—most everyone has affirmed the importance of the differences. You’re the only one who has said we are already unified. But it’s a great thing when you can find a community that truly suits you. I’m glad you’ve found yours in the current ACIM community. I continue to look toward a different future.

• • •

Thanks again, Robert, for a wonderful, thought-provoking commentary.

Over the years I have been in many different Course study groups. The best of these were loosely led by someone with a lot of knowledge of the Course and who encouraged a lot of discussion and comments of personal experience with the Holy Spirit. They could rein in wild discussions and bring the talk back to being Course-based. The worst groups were those that had one leader who would tell you what a section meant after it was read, and a collective gasp could be heard if someone new and curious like me questioned what they said. This is why I value the Circle of Atonement so much, especially your writings: you have studied the Course at a level far deeper than I can personally imagine, and are open to letting the Course guide your thinking instead of just hunting for lines that support your view, which often seems to be what has happened with the Bible. I have often wondered if in a thousand years, the Course community would be as splintered as Christianity now finds itself, and no one will know what it means or what it says.

— Terrie Thomas

• • •

I'm excited that your guidance has led you to reach out with this initiative. How could the process and the end goal of unification be but crucial to all of us? As a poet said, "a thing of beauty is a joy forever." Joining is inevitably joyous.

Strangely, I thought of marriage—how the myriad of differences can lead two persons towards an enduring Holy Relationship. I honestly believe that a miraculous unification can and must happen. The timing is auspicious.

I see two standards for discussion. The text itself and Love. The greatest being the latter.

— Judy Robb

• • •

What a noble plea; that we would unite behind a common goal of discovering the meaning of *A Course In Miracles* through examining Jesus' own words in a spirit of "non-dogmatic...inquiry and discernment." What intellectual and philosophical high ground; that we would value the result of honest, open minded inquiry of the actual "evidence" over our own "sacrosanct" opinions, or the opinions of "experts."

I remember once a Course student said in to me in passing, "Oh, you are a follower of Robert Perry. I don't believe in gurus." I said "Robert would get a really big laugh out of the idea that he is any kind of a 'guru.'" I didn't say anything more, but what I thought was that I never "followed" Robert for a second. I follow this nice Jewish fellow named "Jesus," who walked this earth two thousand years ago living a philosophy that he recently explained in *A Course In Miracles*. I love the guy. And, even though he is not a "guy" anymore, he is my personal guru. And, up until the late sixties, it was pretty difficult to figure out exactly what he was saying two thousand years ago. The guy personally changed the entire world in a way no other human has in the history of earth. But even so, we didn't know exactly what he was trying to teach us then, except through his PR people like that famous salesman Paul. They tried, but I don't think they got the message quite right. They had some light, sure enough, but I don't think they could explain it very well.

Thank God two thousand years after the fact, the "guru" who changed the world finally decided to explain himself. Better late than never. So, in 1965 he writes a spiritual treatise of over six hundred pages of earth shaking, radical ideas. He picks this brilliant Jewish psychologist who had a history of past lives being a channel and priestess to work through. He very carefully "dictates" the *Course In Miracles* to her, making certain she gets every word correct. When her own personal will gets in the way, and she changes anything he says more to her liking, he psychically hounds her until she changes it back. What a doctrinaire fellow this Jesus is!

In this tome, he states clearly that he is the same "Jesus" who walked the earth so long ago, although he makes it clear that he is a rarified version of that character, having completely done "(his) part" in the "Atonement" of humankind. He is unequivocal that he is thereby "in charge" of that Atonement, and that he represents a "bridge" to Heaven; a bridge that traverses rocky ground we could not negotiate on our own.

A friend of mine who has been studying the Course for many years ran across some of those passages recently and they took her aback. She has always felt at odds with her heartfelt devotion to Jesus as her personal savior, and her affiliation with a Course world that rarely even speaks of his life. She exclaimed "That sounds pretty Christian to me!" I said, "Yeah! Doesn't it though!", acknowledging the unsaid prohibition in our Course culture to align ourselves with Christianity, or the life of Jesus himself. Indeed, Jesus told Helen early on that the Course was a "correction" for modern Christianity.

So, being deeply concerned with what this great western guru has to say, I have been keenly interested in the meaning of his words in the Course. I realize of course that understanding that meaning is only the beginning. The Course

aims at spiritual experience; not intellectual understanding. But understanding is clearly requisite to experiencing, and this Jesus fellow goes to some length in the Course to point that out. In the experiential part of the Course's teaching, the Workbook, he says clearly at the outset that "careful study" of the ideas in the textbook is required to make the lessons meaningful. In other words, understanding and experience go *hand in hand*. You can't have one without the other.

Well, now we are in the soup, because the question is, what did Jesus mean by his words in the Course? Words are only symbols of meaning, as the Course itself points out. I think what Robert is suggesting in his article is that we unite **in our true desire to understand** what this great guru, Jesus, is saying, and what he meant by his words in what in my mind was clearly a divine revelation to humankind.

Clearly, there are many disparate opinions about the meaning of Jesus's words in *A Course in Miracles* in many critical areas. In the end of it, they are only opinions. And, like assholes, everybody has one. The only opinion I hold truly dear is the one being communicated by Jesus, leader of the salvation of humankind. And, unlike the mythical tales of his life in Galilee, Jesus has given us a clear rendering of his "opinion" in this light filled revelation called *A Course In Miracles*.

The evidence has been placed before us. With the help of his Spirit to guide our reason, we look first to that evidence for its meaning. If experts come along who provide helpful influence, so be it. But there is a real Authority behind the words of that Course. That Authority meant to convey particular meaning by what it said. Perhaps that meaning will be tailored individually for each mind that confronts it. Tailored though for each individual, a blue suit remains a blue suit; unchanged in its fundamental qualities. Perhaps, and hopefully, that individual meaning will evolve in step with the mind's advancement toward the Light.

So, we are back where we started. What did Jesus say in the Course, and what did he mean by what he said? We all have the three tools necessary to discover this. We have his Spirit to guide us (Holy Spirit, if you prefer), a mind with which to apply reason, and the "evidence" in the form of the Course itself. Let us have at it! And let us befriend one another in this great quest, no matter our differences!

And Robert was never my guru.

— Thomas Dunn

• • •

I, of course, completely agree with what you've written in this month's *Better Way*. The quest for acknowledging what the Course itself says has ever been descriptive of my personal journey. I wouldn't know why anyone would even care to study the Course outside of the desire to be taught from its words. Yet, apparently, such motives do exist.

I'm not really certain of how others can be dissuaded from the inclination to read their own ideas into the Course. If such is their goal, perhaps reading the yellow pages would prove just as enlightening. What I do know is this: Those who chose to read the Course—**for what it says**—will find a great harmony of thought amongst themselves.

— Michael Little

• • •

### Responses from the Circle Course Community:

Well, of course you know that with me, you are preaching to the long-ago converted. Yet I'm glad you wrote this piece. Sometimes the obvious thing just needs to be said, even if there are many people who won't listen to it.

And what you're saying is painfully obvious. What else but the Course itself could be the standard by which all Course interpretations are measured? What else but the actual words of the Course can provide the answers we need?

Moreover, I think everyone in the Course community actually agrees that there are correct and incorrect interpretations of the Course, even if they won't say so. For instance, if you were to say, "According to the Course, the way to God is to never forgive your brother," every Course student would say (at least silently to him- or herself), "Well, no, the Course doesn't say that at all." So everyone recognizes that not *every* interpretation can be correct.

All we're doing is applying this recognition more rigorously. Just as the Course never says that the way to God is to never forgive your brother, it also never says that the holy relationship takes only one person, that God doesn't hear our prayers, etc.

Of course, many questions about Course interpretation are not as easy to resolve as these examples. But the Course is straightforward for the most part, and we have found in our own experience that the Course yields clear answers if we study it carefully enough.

I too have my doubts that the Course community as a whole will ever get on board with this. But what gives me hope is the members of the Circle Course Community and others who have responded positively to your article. We are a



small group, but perhaps we are planting the seeds for a brighter future.

— Greg Mackie

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I think it is a great article and speaks to an important issue about making the truth the goal versus allowing a cacophony of interpretations collide and cause confusion within the community.

I always find it very helpful when those who have expertise in their field who have different interpretations of the evidence make their case and are open to the reviews and challenges of their peers. This is what makes for a reasoned debate and forms a consensus amongst the community. Science is pretty good at this.

The challenge, of course, is that it does take some maturity, humility, and the value of reason over emotion. This is a mighty hurdle in today's popular culture, and specifically current Course culture, but not impossible. I think we actually do crave for the truth, and reason does in the end lead us to the truth. I still make emotional cases from holding on to a "sacred cow" but reason always wins in the end and thankfully so. Otherwise I feel like I am part of the mob in *Lord of the Flies*. Not good!

I personally have not engaged with the larger Course community because of this "anything goes" mindset. I have gotten into discussions that ended up not so well due to mine and the other's limitations. Yet, I actually perpetuate this attitude if I don't engage in hearty debates within the larger Course community. I think that there is an intellectual laziness or aversion out there as well. I think it a skill that needs to be learned through practice, and making mistakes, to engage with others in fruitful discussions around what the Course actually says.

What we have a lot going for us in the Course community is that we do have a document that is pretty straightforward. It uses logic and reason to make its case and it came from a single source during our time. It came through Helen as the scribe and, unlike the Bible, has had very few hands messing with the original dictation, and we have a pretty good record of how it came to be in its current form. This makes clearing up the confusion between interpretations that much easier.

I think a big problem is getting the main interpreters to publicly, and willingly, engage with each other over interpretations. Without this, it is harder to clear up the confusion and let the author's (Jesus) intended message shine through all the different interpretations. It is kind of a trickle-down effect. If the leaders are not able to engage with each other to model a mature and reasoned debate then how is the rest of the community going to see how it is done. Yet, this is still not a deal breaker.

I think that the search for truth rather than what makes us feel good will eventually win out. Yet, it is a value that will need to be instilled. I do think there is a real desire for this and there is a segment of the community ready for it. It just needs to be tended to and reinforced.

Thanks for this great article. I would love to see a unified Course community!

— Ken Froessel

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After reading your article, I shared it with a friend (also an ACIM student). We have both been concerned about the separation of Course students and teachers because of the various "interpretations" of Course material and its concepts and the seemingly inability of some to discuss these differences in a mature manner.

I have been involved with the course to greater and lesser degrees for over twenty years and have listened to a variety of teachers during that time. At first I didn't really notice the disparity of what was said. It started to become more obvious to me that there were problems when the copyright issue came to a head. Since then, I have observed how various people respond when disagreements come up. Some have gotten defensive, some seem to want to "appease" and cover it up saying "it really doesn't matter." Others look the other way, and very few seem willing to discuss the issue in a rational and respectful manner. I think it is hugely important that the course community have a true sense of unity and have often thought back to the time when Bill said to Helen that "there must be another way" and Helen agreed to help him find it.

I wish you well in this endeavor to ask that people in the Course community open their hearts and ask for the wisdom to seek the truth as the writer of *A Course in Miracles* would want us to do. When I read the "Characteristics of God's Teachers" in the Manual, I am reminded of how important they are if this is ever going to occur. I suggest we all think on these things: Trust, Honesty, Tolerance, Gentleness, Joy, Defenselessness, Generosity, Patience, Faithfulness, and Open-Mindedness. Although this asks a lot of us, I personally started with "HOW" from the 12-step community of being Honest, Open, and Willing. I think if we all would made an effort to work on these qualities, it would help a lot in our becoming more unified, which is essential if we are to help new students understand the true essence of the Course.

well remember the struggles I've had in trying to understand and learn the Course, and feel we do others a great disservice when we're not doing our best to work together.

— Colleen Delgado

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I find this a strangely intriguing and stimulating conversation, the strangeness of it emanating from the fact that it feels like quite a sociopolitical discussion.

As I understand it, the point you make is that we need unity in our understandings and interpretations of the Course in order not to deprive the Course of the power it otherwise has as a spiritual document. When the question of “unity under what interpretation” arises, you suggest that the Course itself is its own best arbiter.

One problem I see here is that although the Course may be simple and straightforward to many, it is not to the majority of Course students I've encountered in nearly a decade teaching it. The Course itself points out that the words in which it is written are but poor substitutes for the ideas at which those words point. On the face of that statement alone, it seems to me that any desire to create a single, unified, agreed-upon interpretation of the Course inevitably fails.

In the article, you make the point that “Questions of interpretation can be resolved by turning to the channeled teachings themselves with a non-dogmatic approach of inquiry and discernment.” If properly interpreting the Course requires inquiry and discernment, doesn't it automatically follow that the results of inquiry and the discernment of ambiguity might well vary from student to student? As Greg said in his response, “we have found in our own experience that the Course yields clear answers if we study it carefully enough.” Aye, there's the rub. Clear answers from the Course come only with diligent and careful study.

As a spiritual document, the Course—and its community of followers—shouldn't be expected to be singularly understood. That is true of no other spiritual document of any major or minor spiritual path or tradition of which I'm aware. Interpreting the words, the phrases, the ideas expressed in the Course is a necessarily complex task. In my experience, eighty percent or so of students who begin their study of the Course with the Text report difficulty dealing with even some of the earliest passages. The Course's unconventional use of some traditional words and phrases makes this difficulty inevitable.

I agree with you when you say that not every possible interpretation of every Course teaching should be given equal weight or even consideration. Discourse will reveal those that have the clearest meaning to the greatest number, which is as good a definition of any as we have of how we find Truth in the pages of the Course.

I don't have enough exposure to the broad Course community to be able to comment on much of what's been said, but I can say that even a “bewildering array of diversity” in our understanding of the Course cannot ultimately damage the True Word of Jesus.

Like most other major spiritual traditions, we must guard against a corruption of the core principles of the Course which often radically alter our understanding of love, fear, guilt, sanity and dozens of other concepts about which the Course offers teachings. It would be damaging to permit a teaching of an unloving God to be incorporated into the teachings. At the same time, I see very little if anything to be gained by overruling and prohibiting the holding of contradictory or seemingly corrective beliefs about the Course.

In your article, you point out:

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.

— Dan Shafer

*Robert replies:*

Dan, thank you very much for your thoughtful response. I'd like to address a few of the points you made.

You say, “The Course itself points out that the words in which it is written are but poor substitutes for the ideas at which those words point. On the face of that statement alone, it seems to me that any desire to create a single, unified,

agreed-upon interpretation of the Course inevitably fails.” I don’t see how that follows. Even poor substitutes can clearly point to what they symbolize. And that in fact is the claim made again and again in the Course. Look at these quotes, for instance:

You have begun to realize that this is a very practical course, because it means exactly what it says.  
(original version of T-8.IX.8:1)

I have made every effort to use words which are almost impossible to distort, but man is very inventive when it comes to twisting symbols around. (original version of T-3.I. 3:11)

This course is perfectly clear. If you do not see it clearly, it is because you are interpreting against it. (T-11. VI. 3:1-2)

The Course openly claims to communicate its ideas quite clearly. What do we do with these statements in the Course? In the face of them, I don’t see how we can continue to say, “Well, everyone will come up with their own interpretations, and that’s an inevitable and healthy thing.”

If you would like to consult a more thorough discussion of this, you may want to read my article, “Interpretation and the Future of the Course.” There, I examine a much longer list of quotes and conclude:

1. The Course is not meant to be “open to more than one interpretation.” Jesus has a particular meaning that he is trying to convey.
2. He is trying to express that meaning in the clearest way he can, making “every effort to use words which are almost impossible to distort.”
3. The lack of clarity, then, doesn’t come from him, but from us. We are prone to “twisting” his words, “interpreting against” them, almost willfully misinterpreting what he says.
4. To correct for this, we must be willing to “be very careful in interpreting.” We must resist the temptation to “read this hastily or wrongly,” and instead read and “re-read very carefully.”

Yes, this requires diligent and careful study, as Greg pointed out. And it will require more than that. It will require a community of scholarship. Think of it this way. Does any scientist think that there is more than one valid interpretation of, say, the process of evolution? Obviously not. But that doesn’t mean that someone can just discover that process with a moment of casual reflection. It takes a lot of investigation and it takes skilled investigators in dialogue with each other. It takes a village, to coin a phrase. But the answers are there, if we really want them.

You also say, “As a spiritual document, the Course—and its community of followers—shouldn’t be expected to be singularly understood. That is true of no other spiritual document of any major or minor spiritual path or tradition of which I’m aware.” I’m surprised that you say this. Somehow, my lengthy example of the Pathwork seems to have passed you right by. Yet that is exactly what you are talking about here—a body of spiritual teachings that, according to representatives of its major organizations, is singularly understood. That’s the proof that it can be done. Interestingly, I have received about two dozen responses to the article so far, and so far not a single person has mentioned the Pathwork example. It’s as if the example that everything I argue for in the article is possible wasn’t even in there.

I think one thing you say near the end strikes me as particularly important: “At the same time, I see very little if anything to be gained by overruling and prohibiting the holding of contradictory or seemingly corrective beliefs about the Course.” But of course, I said very clearly that I’m not talking about prohibiting certain beliefs about the Course. Yet I think that is how many Course students almost inevitably read my call. They read the call to unity as a threat to freedom. I think that is the key here. In my view, we Course students are too attached to our freedom; in this case, the freedom to believe whatever we want about the Course. I don’t think we see the natural consequences of this. First and most obviously, it results in a hopelessly fragmented Course community. But second and more importantly, if we are so attached to our freedom in relation to other Course students, what makes us think we aren’t attached to our freedom in relation to the Course itself? What makes us think the purpose of that freedom is to be true to the Course rather than go our own way from it?

I don’t mean to be hard on you. Your response was thoughtful and gently put, which is why I felt motivated to respond to it at such length. I hope my response helps you in processing this issue.

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This is an exciting article, Robert. I have wished for a unified Course community for a long time. I love the Course,

and I hate to see its value to students weakened by disagreements and animosity among those who supposedly follow its teachings.

I love the idea that the Course community could be unified around the authority of the Course itself—being willing to go deeper into the meaning of the Course without defensiveness, inviting the Holy Spirit’s guidance, and being willing and even happy to be proven wrong—or to accept that we still have different viewpoints. That is so consistent with Course teachings, and yet so challenging.

I’m inspired to find ways I can use this approach myself. I have some thoughts about it but would love to hear other suggestions. The first, of course, would be that I always study the Course with an attitude of openness. If I encounter disagreement with others, as in a study group, I would suggest we each find Course references to support our viewpoints, when time permits, and then compare them. I would pray for guidance about the disagreement, and if it seems serious, I would suggest to the other person that we pray together.

— Martha Fitzgerald

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From what I’ve seen of the general ACIM community over, say, the last twenty years, I’d hazard that an awful lot of its members are not awfully keen on scholarship. In that, they are probably fairly representative of the public as a whole.

And when you think about it, who can blame folk for being wary of scholarship? After all, scholarship—in the sense of doing advanced study in a special field—sounds like hard and time-consuming work. Worse still, doesn’t scholarship create a new pecking order, by granting special authority to those elite few who have both the time and the brains for it? And worse *still*, if we take scholarship seriously, doesn’t it close off our option to go on thinking whatever the hell we like, regardless of the evidence-based conclusions that a bit of advanced study might throw up?

Good grief, it’s no surprise so many in the ACIM community have given scholarship such very short shrift. Much better, surely, to stick with a free-floatin’, anythin’-goes sort of vibe. Scholarship? Rigorous examination of the actual text? You must be kidding. Where’s the fun in that?

On the other hand, though, we can all see where the free-floatin’, anythin’-goes road takes us. Straight to la-la land—the land of fuzzy, risible, New Age claptrap.

So...despite recognizing the drawbacks of scholarship—drawbacks like the hard work, the discipline, the danger of creating a new elite—I think we have to embrace it. If we want to see the Course escape ending up in a New Age nut-job ghetto, we have no alternative. A serious spiritual masterwork requires serious scholarship. And serious scholarship requires a mature, united Course community. A community able to accept that healthy, open debate is not just okay but actually necessary. Provided, of course, as Robert says, that the argument is based, always, one hundred percent, on the principle of respect for the evidence set clearly before us in the form of the words of the Course itself.

Good on you, Robert, for pressing the case for unafraid and rigorous scholarship so consistently and so eloquently for so many years.

— Phil Brisk

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I think I’ve always had (although have not always been *aware* of having) a longing for community, for really belonging. Being a part of the Circle Course Community offers a taste of what it would be like if we all were part of the kind of unified Course community you describe in your article. To be honest, I’m not sure that it will come about, but it is a beautiful vision to hold. In the meantime, let’s continue to help this Circle Course Community develop into a loving and authentic example of that broader community we yearn for.

I’ve been familiar with the Pathwork material for years and have been impressed with its sound, practical, and helpful teachings. I even had some Pathwork counseling way back when, but I eventually stopped, mainly because the counselor stuck so consistently to the Pathwork teachings and was constantly bringing me back to them! It wasn’t my path; I was already a Course student then and felt hemmed in by the Pathwork approach. However, as a Course student and teacher, fidelity to the teachings and consistency of approach, have become as important to me as they were to my Pathwork counselor.

I hadn’t realized all the connections between the way the Pathwork and the Course came about. I bet that if back in the early days Helen had assumed the role and the authority that Eva Pierrakos had, the Course would have developed in such a different way and the kind of community you describe would have formed around it. Imagine if students had been invited to ask Jesus questions the way Pierrakos students had with the Guide—and if Jesus had answered them! What



would that have done to “all interpretations are right”? I can’t imagine that Jesus would have said, “Here’s my Course; do whatever you want with it; interpret it however you want. It’s all good.”

Sometimes students ask me, “What do you think about...?” and I invariably respond with, “The point is not what *I* think, but what the Course says about that. So, let’s have a look at *it*.” I have a real sense of comfort knowing that I can turn to the Course and trust that the answer will be there. Why ever would I prefer my own opinions!

— Mary Anne Buchowski