



CONTENTS

| | |
|--|---|
| “The Power of the Mind and the Challenges of Our Lives:” | |
| What Role Does One Play in the Other? <i>by Robert Perry</i> | 1 |
| Sacred Exchange: Real Healing <i>by Amy Speach</i> | 6 |
| Circle Mailbox | 8 |



A BETTER WAY

The Power of the Mind and the Challenges of Our Lives

What Role Does One Play in the Other?

by Robert Perry

You are facing a challenge in your life. What role does the power of your mind play in that challenge—both in dispelling it and in bringing it about in the

first place? The following picture is my attempt to gather together a number of threads from the teaching of *A Course in Miracles*.

When we face a challenge in our lives, whether it be an illness, a financial crisis, or a relationship problem, we often ask ourselves, “How did I manifest that?” Many of us have come to believe that our thoughts manifest everything in our lives, and the question that naturally arises then is *which* of our thoughts manifested this particular situation in our lives.

I can’t find anywhere in the Course, however, that encourages us to do that. There is one place, in the *Psychotherapy* supplement, which says it’s possible to do that. But even this passage quickly points out that this is not what brings healing:

Sickness takes many forms, and so does unforgiveness. The forms of one but reproduce the forms of the other, for they are the same illusion. So closely is one translated into the other, that a careful study of the form a sickness takes will point quite clearly to the form of unforgiveness that it represents. Yet seeing this will not effect a cure. That is achieved by only one recognition; that only forgiveness heals an unforgiveness, and only an unforgiveness can possibly give rise to sickness of any kind. (P-2.VI.5)

What I’m going to suggest here is a process that incorporates what the Course says about how and why we “manifest” challenges in our lives, and also preserves the Course’s real emphasis on how to face those challenges. As I go through this, you might want to hold in mind a particular challenge in your life and apply everything I’m saying to that. So, please think of some difficult issue that you are facing, like an illness, a relationship problem, or a financial crisis.

“Here lies a witness”

How did you manifest that challenge? Through your ego, you manifested it as a *witness*. This is based on a Text discussion (T-8.VII.3-6) which pictures physical illness as a “false witness” that the ego puts on the stand, “a witness to your frailty, your vulnerability, and your extreme need to depend on external guidance” (T-8.VII.6:2).

More specifically, we can view this challenge as a witness that *love is dead*. I say this based on a scene in Lesson 163 in which the ego writes the following epitaph for the deceased Son of God: “Here lies a witness God is dead” (W-pI.163.5:3). I’ve replaced “God” with “love” to make it feel more applicable to our challenges, but you could insert instead “peace is dead” or “joy is dead,” depending on your situation.

You can therefore picture your challenging situation as a large, man-high tombstone standing in front of you, on which is written, “Here is a witness that love is dead.” From the ego’s standpoint, that is why it’s there. It’s there to take

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Circle of Atonement

P.O. Box 4238

West Sedona, AZ 86340

Phone: (928) 282-0790

Fax: (928) 282-0523

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

E-mail: info@circleofa.org

Website: www.circleofa.org

Bookstore: www.circlepublishing.org

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A Course in Miracles is a spiritual path. Its purpose is to train us to work miracles—to accept and extend to others the shifts in perception that awaken us to God. It consists of three volumes, which signify the three aspects of its program:

- ◆ Text : Through studying the teaching, the Course's thought system first enters our minds.
- ◆ Workbook for Students: Through doing the practice, the Course's thought system penetrates more and more deeply into our minds.
- ◆ Manual for Teachers: Through extending our healed perception to others, the Course's thought system receives its final reinforcement and becomes the only thing in our minds.

The Course's message is that the source of our suffering is not the world's mistreatment of us, but rather our egocentric attack on the world. This attack convinces us that we have defiled our nature beyond repair, that we are irredeemably guilty. Yet the Course says true reality cannot be defiled; it is a realm of pure, changeless, unified spirit. This realization allows us to forgive the world's apparent mistreatment of us by recognizing that it did not actually occur. And as we see this forgiveness come forth from us—see that we are capable of something genuinely loving and egoless—we gradually realize that we never defiled ourselves. Thus we awaken to the untouched innocence of our true nature.

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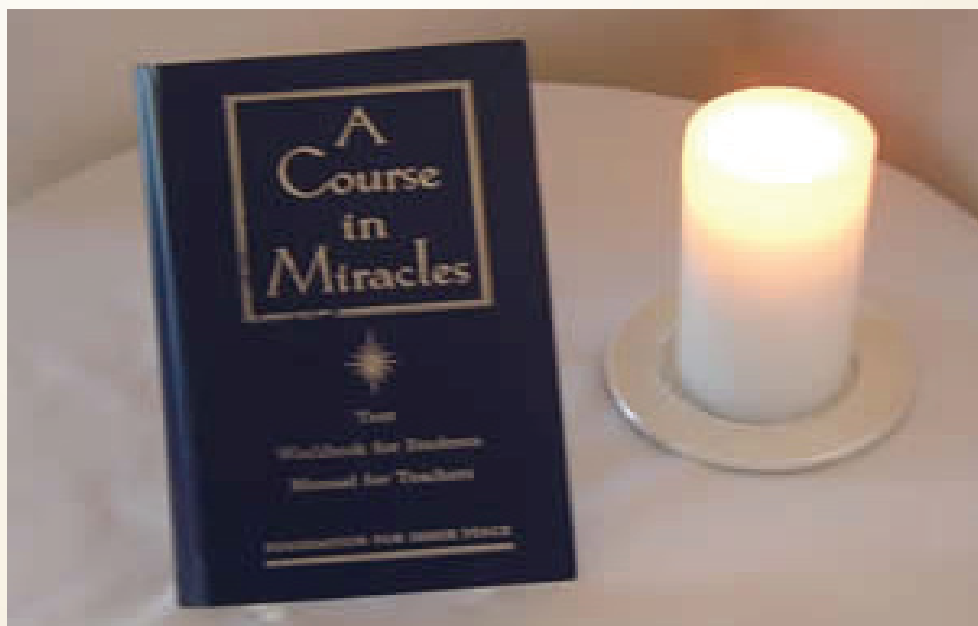
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the stand in the courtroom of your life and provide convincing testimony of the ego's view of reality. Indeed, that is what, in the ego's eyes, the whole world is there for—as concrete evidence that the ego is right. The difficulties in our lives, however, are the ego's *star* witnesses.

“Trials are but lessons”

That's the first answer to “Why did I manifest this?” There is, however, a second answer, and that is the Holy Spirit's. The same thing the ego sees as a witness, the Holy Spirit sees as a *lesson*, as we can see in this well-known passage:

Trials are but lessons that you failed to learn presented once again, so where you made a faulty choice before you now can make a better one, and thus escape all pain that what you chose before has brought to you. In every difficulty, all distress, and each perplexity Christ calls to you and gently says, “My brother, choose again.” (T-31.VIII.3:1-2)

So somehow the Holy Spirit has taken the same thing the ego manifested, and “presented” it (just as Lesson 135 says He “gently planned” it). I assume this means that He had a hand in shaping *how* and *when* this trial showed up in our lives, so that it could serve as a lesson in truth, and not just a witness for illusion.

How, then, does this trial serve as a lesson? The purpose of any lesson, of course, is that you learn something from it. It is an experience designed to teach you something. But how does this tombstone appearing in front of you teach you something; at least, something *positive*?

The tombstone in itself, as the word “trial” suggests, is *trying*. It is pain-inducing. Who actually enjoys the testimony that love is dead? There is, however, a way out of this pain, and that way out is the lesson we are meant to learn. Even in conventional thinking, when something hurts, the lesson is to stop doing the thing that hurts. Think, for example, about the pain that comes from putting your hand on the stove. What is the lesson you should learn from that? Obviously, to not do that again. Or think about someone's lies persuading you to make a bad investment, in which you lose your shirt. What is the lesson to learn from that? To not be taken in by those lies again.

That's the lesson that the tombstone is there to teach us—to not listen to this witness, for it is lying, and its lies have caused us pain. That, you could say, is the meaning of what Christ whispers to us in that passage about trials. “Choose once again” amounts to “This time, don't listen to the witness.”

We can picture it this way. Behind the headstone that says “love is dead” is the shining reality of love, hidden by the headstone. The pain caused by the headstone, sooner or later, naturally pulls us beyond the headstone to the joy of love behind it. Our lesson, therefore, is to overlook the headstone, to see past it to the reality of love. That is actually another way of describing forgiveness. Forgiveness says to the person in front of us, “I will not listen to the witness of your behavior, which says that love is dead, but see past it to your Identity, which is love itself.”

This choice is the reversal of what put the tombstone in place. What put it in place was our past choices to believe that love is not real, that love is dead. That's how the tombstone got there. When we now choose to ignore the witness of the tombstone and look past it to the reality of love, we reverse those past choices, and thus escape all pain that what we chose before has brought to us.

This one lesson is a miniature version of the overall lesson of this world. The world is there to present us with constant witnesses that love is dead, so that the discomfort they induce eventually motivates us to look beyond them all and choose the reality of love instead. And the more we do that, the less we believe in the case against love, and the more we believe in the truth of love, no matter how loud the witnesses against it are. And when we can overlook even the loudest witnesses, look past even the most imposing headstones, then nothing can shake our conviction in the reality of love. And then our learning is complete, and all the headstones, including the world itself, will vanish.

The tombstones, then, are actually extremely valuable. If everywhere we looked love was easy to see, then we'd feel no need to overcome our past choices against love. Why would we need to? We could still be happy even while those choices remain buried in our minds, intact and undisturbed. It is only when our past choices stand in front of us now, imposing pain on us *now*, that we are motivated to climb over them to reach the love on the other side. Only in this way do we really put those tombstones behind us. Only in this way do we really relinquish our hidden belief that love is dead, and come to believe in the reality of love *no matter what*. It's the old story of the grain of sand causing the oyster to make the pearl. You could say that's what we're all doing here—making pearls. We need to be grateful, then, for the tombstones in our lives, without which we would simply see no need to make the pearl.

The tombstone disappears

Getting back to your particular challenge, let's say that you do exactly what I'm talking about, that you overlook the witness of the tombstone and see past it to the reality of love. What happens then? Based on what the Course says in many places, I think we can conclude that you unleash the power of love, which can, and probably will, shine the tombstone away. To use language that is more Course-like, you allow the Holy Spirit to remove the trial. As a result, you may well witness your challenge miraculously taken away.

You may assume that you should remove the tombstone yourself with the unlimited power of your mind. In fact, if you have taken in enough of contemporary spirituality, you will probably assume exactly that. You will believe that if you just invoke the law of attraction with enough conviction and vivid imagination, that tombstone will go away.

However, you cannot find this message in *A Course in Miracles*. Indeed, if you search the Course for its counsel on these matters, you will consistently find a very different message. For instance, *The Song of Prayer* says that you should not pray for external things—which, of course, would include the *removal* of external things. Rather, you should pray merely for the song of God's Love, trusting that with that song will come "the echoes" (S-1.I.3:3)—the specific things that you need.

In a similar vein, the Course does not picture the healer aiming energy at the body, or even at the mind's decision to be sick. Rather, the healer "overlooks the mind [its decision to be sick] *and* body, seeing only the face of Christ shining in front of him, correcting all mistakes and healing all perception" (M-22.4:5). The healer looks past the tombstone to Who the patient really is. And this allows the patient to be healed, in body *and* in mind.

In an important passage, the Course paints a vision of all the obstacles and difficulties in your life—all the headstones—being removed. But it's not a picture of your mind claiming its power and sending those obstacles back into the quantum vacuum. Rather, you do just one thing: "accept His plan as the one function that you would fulfill." And once you do that, "there will be nothing else the Holy Spirit will not arrange for you without your effort. He will go before you making straight your path, and leaving in your way no stones to trip on, and no obstacles to bar your way" (T-20.IV.8:4-5). You just accept your function with singleness of mind, and the Holy Spirit then takes care of all external things for you, "without your effort."

We are seeing the same basic message again and again. You just see past the witness *against* love to the reality *of* love, and then let the Holy Spirit take care of what happens on the outside. He will remove that witness from the stand for you (assuming it's no longer needed for your learning). Which means that you leave to Him when and how to do that, trusting that whatever He does with that headstone is perfect for the needs of your learning.

If you have made a different choice and the headstone is then removed, what explanation do you give yourself? Do you decide that your act of choosing again allowed the Holy Spirit to take it away? Or do you assume that it just went away as part of the natural course of things? After all, challenges come and challenges go; that's just how the world works.

My main concern here is that we don't tell ourselves something outlandish, something that amounts to an abandonment of reason and descent into abject superstition. To give a really extreme example, let's say an asteroid is hurtling toward earth, with a fifty percent chance of hitting us. Then let's say that on a certain morning, you perform a ritual. In this ritual, you place an orange on the table and then push a sugar cube across the table toward the orange, causing it to veer off at the last minute and miss the orange. A few weeks after you do this, lo and behold, the asteroid does miss the earth. The scientists, of course, have their explanation, in terms of known physical laws and forces, but you know the real reason. At this point, aren't we all deeply concerned about your mental stability?

On the other hand, miraculous things do happen. Challenges often suspiciously melt away right after a different choice has been made. So we want to fully honor that possibility and not discount it.

How do we choose which one to go with? My belief is that we need to be able to tell a convincing story of why this challenge in particular was removed not by the ordinary course of things, but by the Holy Spirit as a result of our choice. The story should be an account of how events within us really seemed to mesh with events outside us. To the extent this story makes a good case that the removal of the challenge was indeed a miraculous thing, then to that same extent we should consider the miraculous explanation to be more probable. To the extent the case is weak or inconclusive, to that same extent we should be agnostic about the whole matter, and not be troubled by the fact that we just don't know.

Summary

What, then, is the role of our mind's power in the challenges of our lives?

1. How did you manifest that challenge? Your ego put it there as a *witness*, as a tombstone on which it wrote, "Here is a witness that love is dead."
2. The Holy Spirit, however, also put it there, only as a *lesson*, an opportunity to reverse your past choices against love.
3. You learn this lesson by refusing to listen to the witness, by looking past the tombstone to the reality of love behind it.

4. When you do that, you unleash the power of love. You allow the Holy Spirit to remove the tombstone for you. That removal is His business, not yours.
5. It's rational to believe that your choice allowed the Holy Spirit to remove the challenge *if* you can tell a convincing story to that effect, in which internal events and external events seem genuinely interwoven. Otherwise, remain agnostic about it.

What I like about this overall picture is that it incorporates a number of disparate threads from the Course into a single process, one that hangs together, that makes sense of why things happen the way they do, and that is also practical.

For the sake of that practicality, let's convert the various steps into an exercise. Please take the challenge you have been thinking about throughout and make it the subject of the following exercise. I sincerely hope this can serve as a way in which, perhaps after a long time, you can at last learn the priceless lesson that has been standing before you.

Exercise in looking past the tombstone

Within your mind, picture your challenge as a large, thick tombstone, at least as tall as yourself, standing solidly in front of you.

This tombstone blocks out the light behind it, placing you in shadow.

Feel yourself in shadow.

On the headstone are carved these ominous words: "Here is a witness that love is dead."

(Based on the nature of your challenge, you may want to replace the word "love" with another word, like "peace," "joy," "safety," "God," etc.)

Realize that this is indeed how you have reacted to your challenge.

You have seen it as convincing testimony that love, in fact, is dead.

Now realize that that is exactly why your ego put it there.

It placed a false witness on the stand, and you fell for it.

You believed all of this witness's lies, and suffered as a result.

But now realize that the Holy Spirit also put that tombstone there, as the perfect lesson for you.

He was simply presenting your own false beliefs in the form of this external witness,

so that this time you could change your mind about them,

"and thus escape all pain that what you chose before has brought to you."

You do this by looking past the headstone to the shining reality of love behind it.

The headstone is grief; the love behind it is joy.

So why wouldn't you look past one to the other?

Look at the depressing inscription on the headstone and say to yourself,

"I will not listen to this witness. Its lies have only brought me pain."

Say, "I will look past this false witness to the undiminished light of love."

With this statement, see a small spot in the middle of the tombstone become transparent.

As it does, a single ray of the light of love begins to shine through.

Feel it fall on your face, warming you with its light.

*Feel the burden of the problem lift from you,
as you feel increasingly light, carefree, and filled with hope.*

*Now see this spot of transparency grow...and grow,
until gradually, the entire tombstone becomes like a pane of clear glass,
letting the light of love through without impediment.*

*As this radiant light falls on you, feel yourself filled up with the light of love,
so that nothing else matters, nothing else seems real.*

*You no longer care what the headstone says, or how loudly it says it.
For it has no power to block your vision of love.
Now you know that love is not dead, for love is alive in you.*

*Finally, realize that your choice will allow the Holy Spirit to remove the glass headstone.
For you have undone the choice against love that put the headstone there in the first place.
And having done that, your job is now finished.
Leave the removal of the headstone to Him,
trusting that He will do so in a way and at a time that is perfect for the needs of your learning.
Be thankful that the tombstone was there, for you needed that lesson.
And be thankful now that it will be gone, and leave you face to face with love itself.*



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'.*

SACRED EXCHANGE

by Amy Speech

Real Healing

As part of an assignment for the first class in my counseling degree program, I recently had the pleasure of interviewing Kathy Chomitz, a beloved member of our Circle Course Community and one of the fourteen teachers currently enrolled in the Circle's Teacher of Pupils Training Program. I first met Kathy at Course Oasis, the Circle satellite led by Mary Anne Buchowski in Ottawa, and had the chance to reconnect with her in March at the second gathering of CCC members here in Sedona. During that visit, Robert met her in person for the first time, having gotten to know her through blog posts and by hearing her soft-spoken and seemingly serious manner on CCC telephone classes. He and others who were meeting Kathy for the first time were surprised at her petite stature and lighthearted, almost impish ways — what Robert aptly described as a kind of “dimply delight.”

As a staff nurse on a six-bed palliative care unit in southern Ontario, Kathy counts on her relationship with the Course to keep her nourished and allow her to be completely present for her patients and coworkers. “Palliative care is something I've been drawn to right from the beginning, even though I've worked in emergency and ICU and all those crazy places,” she says. “I always had this awareness of the possibility of death, and of the need to allow people a safe space to contemplate the fact that this might be it — to give them time to bring whatever healing they needed to bring into their relationships with one another at that moment, just in case there was no more time.”

She understands her work as a form of ministry that goes beyond meeting the physical needs of those she cares for. “Nurses have this unique place where we can do the most intimate things with people in a healing capacity that's not threatening,” Kathy says. “We take care of their daily needs when they can no longer do it. And within that time there's a place for being in a therapeutic kind of communication, which has always been extremely important to me. Within the context of that physical care, there is emotional and spiritual work going on that the patient may not even be aware of.”

As an example, Kathy shared with me a touching story about a gentleman she cared for who was dying with ALS, and who was feeling distraught over the loss of his physical abilities as a result of the disease. At one point, he threatened to remove the device that was making it possible for him to breathe. Kathy understood that it was because that gave him a sense of having some control over his condition, although removing the device would hasten his death.

Kathy felt a compelling inner nudge to go into his room one day. She sat on the floor next to his wheelchair, looked up at him, and said, “I just want to ask you one thing: Why is it that you feel you’re not worthy of the care that you need?” Her tender question broke through to him immediately, opening the floodgates and causing him to break down in tears. That led to a long conversation in which he expressed how difficult it was for him to be unable to reciprocate anyone for all the care he was receiving. “We talked and talked and I told him about all the gifts he brought into our relationship — the gifts of his quick humor and intelligence, his willingness to treat everyone he met with respect and genuine interest, his patience and courage in the face of a devastating disease,” Kathy says. “And just the blessing of his presence every day.”

She believes a real healing occurred that day, and says such opportunities are abundant in her work, and are what she values most about it. “But it isn’t always serious,” she says. On this same patient’s birthday, Kathy and one of her colleagues dressed in over-sized surgical gowns and gloves and went into his room with an IV pole and a huge long rectal tube and asked, Groucho Marx style, “Does somebody need some help in here?” She says he laughed so hard she was afraid he would stop breathing!

Kathy shared the story of another patient, a young woman in her forties who had opted not to have traditional interventions and whose family spoke openly of expecting a miracle cure. The situation required Kathy to take a stand with the patient’s family, insisting on giving the patient pain medication to ease her suffering, although it was against their wishes. She laughed at herself when telling me this, a kind of acknowledgement that, for all her dimply delight, she could be tougher than she looks when that’s what was called for.

In this patient’s room was a picture of her as a younger, healthy woman. Her family members would point to the picture and say, with complete conviction, “That’s what she is going to look like again.” As Kathy got to know them, she came to understand that they were seeing the patient as healed and whole, much the way we are learning to see our brothers through the forgiveness practice the Course is teaching us. “It honestly didn’t matter to them if the healing occurred before she died, or after,” Kathy says. “So I was able to talk with them in a way that allowed them to keep their faith in her as a whole being, as well as someone in need of intervention that I could give.”

One day as she was putting on her coat to go home, Kathy was invited by this patient’s mother to come into her room, where the family was gathered, so she could meet the patient’s sister. Upon meeting Kathy, the patient’s sister said, “Oh, I’ve seen you before. You have a really nice way about you. You draw people to you.”

And her mother said, “Yes. People who don’t know about the light see it in you.”

Kathy says, “What she said was stunning. It was a real confirmation of that place we were able to get to, regardless of what looked like differences on the surface. I know the people I work with didn’t ever feel comfortable with them as a family, thinking they had a disregard for traditional medicine and were seeking a spiritual healing. My coworkers felt like they were failing this family, because they couldn’t get them to see that this daughter was dying. Well, they knew perfectly well that she was dying. But they were maintaining their belief in a loving God, and trusted that she was going to be healed at the moment of death, if not before.”

So although the “official” focus of Kathy’s work is seeing to the physical needs and comfort of her patients, she sees her real role as being in relationship with them and being sensitive to their emotional and spiritual needs, and those of their families. Her work is full of the mundane much of the time, but for her there is always a sense of privilege at being able to establish a loving, gentle, and healing space for her patients.

“Without my work with the Course, I probably would have burnt out to a crisp a long time ago,” she says. “But the Course gives me the spiritual underpinnings that keep me nourished. I feel like I am drawing from this continuous sort of bottomless well that has absolutely nothing to do with me. I’m able to be where and what people need me to be.

“This is what I’ve learned from the Course, and what I bring with me every day: ‘You can’t change the way I feel about you. You can’t change who you are or how loved you are.’ My whole purpose is to let them understand they’re loved, and that nothing can ever change that.”



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

Amy Speech is the Circle’s office manager in Sedona and a founding member of the Circle Course Community. She is a member of the team of teachers offering the morning Workbook telephone class, and is part of the first class of the Circle’s Teacher of Pupils Training Program.

CIRCLE MAILBOX

We received the following comments on Greg's article entitled "What Should I Do for Him, Your Holy Son?": How We Can Truly Forgive Others and Set Ourselves Free," in A Better Way #117.

Once again, I must say that this recent article of yours is truly without equal. I don't know if the "stars aligned" between what you wrote and some junction point in my own personal journey, or if perhaps it's something else. What I do know is that I find the entirety of what you've written to be most helpful in every way.

"Forgiving others is how we forgive ourselves." Really? This has been the very point of my personal studies for the last several weeks now. For you to reiterate such a sentiment in this latest offering of *A Better Way* is truly encouraging. The more I continue my own studies, the more I continue to grow in confidence toward what it is that both you and Robert offer through your many writings and teachings. At first I could not say this with complete assurance, but now that my own understanding has gained some measure of maturity, I also am in a position to appreciate your ambitions to a much greater degree.

And so, to follow the Course's logic, dreaming is the only answer that truly fulfills the criteria describing the nature of our dilemma. At first, to me, this answer seemed so fitting — so right. It wasn't until the weight of years passed by that I began to realize the *tremendous* aversion each of us possesses toward truly accepting this position. Dreaming? Illusion? It's the last thing any of us truly believe isn't it? If we did believe it, we would not find ourselves in the present human condition — suffering. We don't believe it, and that is why we suffer. This stuff's real to us, and the highest aim of the Course is to lead us to that place within ourselves where we no longer accept it as real. (That right there is a paraphrase of the definition of Atonement.) Its highest aim is that the reality of God becomes so all-encompassing that the worlds of guilt and sin sink into meaninglessness before us.

I think you've done a fantastic job of furthering the goal of the Course with this one article. You've explained yourself (and His message) quite well. And I can't help but imagine that many minds will be affected for the better after having read and digested what it is you've offered us.

— Michael Little

• • •

Greg, I love this article, and I want you to know that I really like your writing in general. I like how practical and personal you make the Course's teachings. Thank you!!

— Jan O'Kelley