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# A BETTER WAY

## “A Method of Conversion”

### Thoughts on How to Truly Change Hearts and Minds

by **Greg Mackie**

Everyone who has ever engaged in the process of discussing contrasting views — and certainly anyone following the elections of this or any other year — is familiar with the “echo chamber” phenomenon: people holding biased points of view so firmly entrenched that no amount of evidence can budge them. Of course, we tend to see it more readily in others, but if we’re honest, we can’t deny that

this phenomenon exists in ourselves as well. What can be done to free us from the echo chamber, to truly uproot us from our entrenched positions and open our minds to a different point of view? In a world that desperately needs a “better way,” a way rooted in limitless love for everyone and everything, how can we truly change hearts and minds in a lasting way, including our own?

### The limits of rational argument

A typical method especially favored by intellectual types like me is that old standby, rational argument. Surely, we tell ourselves, if we can just put all the facts on the table and rationally discuss the evidence for each position in a fair and balanced way, the light will dawn on everyone’s mind and the truth will set us free. Alas, as those of us who have tried this can tell you from unfortunate experience, this doesn’t usually work too well. All too often, discussions can be dominated by that mindset so aptly captured in the well-known witticism “Don’t confuse me with the facts.”

In fact (if I dare say the word “fact”), according to a *New York Times* [article](#) I recently read, studies show that not only doesn’t the “fair and balanced” presentation of evidence usually work, but it often has the effect of entrenching people more deeply. According to these studies, when people who are strongly convinced of a position beforehand are given reasonable arguments on both sides, they end up being more convinced than before of their original position. According to the article, this is due to a phenomenon called “biased assimilation,” in which people give more weight to information that supports their position and less weight to information that contradicts it. So, when information supporting both sides is presented, the information that supports their position is assimilated, while the information that doesn’t support it is dismissed.

This doesn’t mean that we should abandon facts and evidence when trying to persuade; it simply means that facts and evidence alone are not usually enough. How, then, are deeply entrenched people really convinced to change their minds? The author of the article speculates that one way out of the echo chamber may be what he calls “surprising validators.” These are people who support (hence “validate”) a position one normally wouldn’t expect them to support (hence “surprising”), especially people whom the person contemplating the issue respects and admires. For example, if a “law and order” type hears left-oriented Latino advocates speaking out against Arizona’s controversial immigration law, the response will likely be “Bah, just the usual liberal bleeding hearts.” But if he hears police officers speaking against the law (as many have), he may say, “Hmmm, if even policemen are against this, perhaps I need to reconsider it.”

I’ve been thinking a lot about this whole issue, because I’ve long been dismayed by our tendency — mine included — to retreat into our own little bubbles, preach to the choir, and treat with disdain anyone who has a different point of view. I was recently at a seminar where a person I generally agreed with dismissed those he disagreed with by calling

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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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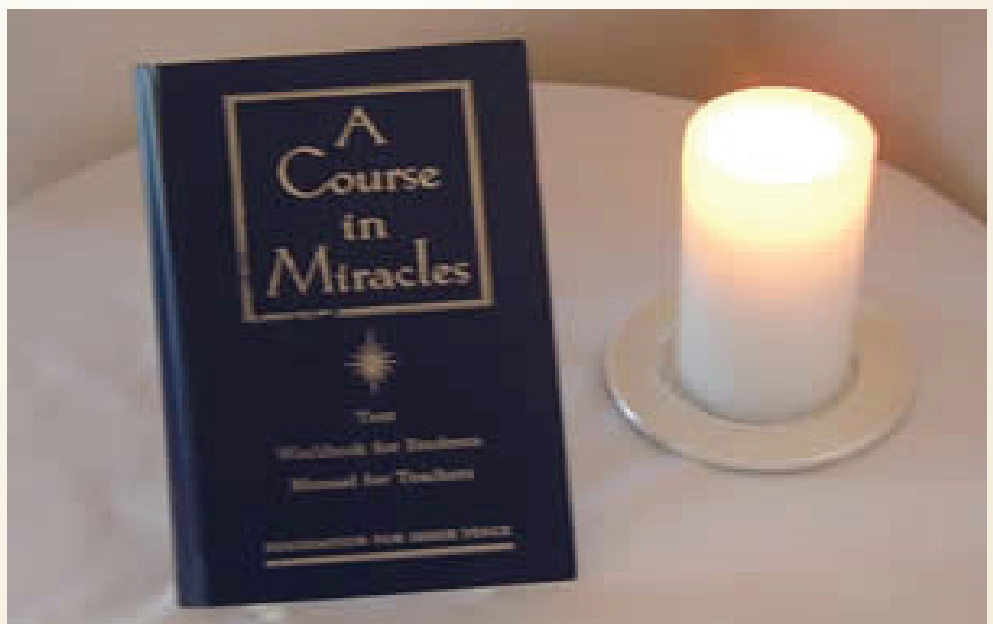
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them “morons” and “ignoramus.” True, in my opinion the people he was talking about have views that I don’t find very sensible either. But I believe with all my heart that for the world to be truly blessed, we must all learn to regard each other as dear brothers and sisters, equally and immensely worthy of love and compassion. I think the person I just referred to would actually agree. But how can we make progress toward this exalted goal if we (in our words or in our hearts) contemptuously dismiss those who disagree with us? Are they not our brothers and sisters too?

### **Should we even be *trying* to change hearts and minds?**

As a Course student, I naturally turn to the Course to help me with this issue. The question of how people’s minds are changed is important, especially when it is applied to things that really matter, like the things the Course wants us to change our minds about. The first question that comes up is the most basic of all: From the Course’s point of view, are we supposed to be in the business of convincing others of our convictions at all? Based on my experience, many Course students answer that question “no,” and it is true that the Course doesn’t recommend trying to convince the world by “preaching to it” (W-pI.37.3:2). I’ve never felt called to join the preachers on the street corners, book in hand, proclaiming the gospel to all and sundry. An evangelist in the conventional sense I’m not.

That being said, the Course claims that we literally can’t help but try to convince others of what we believe — in short, we are always *teachers* of the ego or the spirit, whether we’re aware of it or not. We are always trying to convince others and thereby ourselves of whatever it is we believe: “Teaching is a constant process; it goes on every moment of the day, and continues into sleeping thoughts as well” (M-In.1:6).

Moreover, the Course speaks of this constant process of teaching in words reminiscent of those evangelical preachers: “Teaching is but a call to witnesses to attest to what you believe. It is a method of conversion” (M-In.2:7-8). Metaphorically speaking, we’re all on that street corner. The only choice we really have, then, is *what* gospel we are offering others and ourselves:

The question is not whether you will teach, for in that there is no choice. The purpose of the course might be said to provide you with a means of choosing what you want to teach on the basis of what you want to learn. (M-In.2:4-5)

So, whether we like it or not, the answer to the question of whether we should try to convince people of our convictions is even stronger than “Yes, you should” — it’s more along the lines of “You *will* whether you think you ‘should’ or not, so choose your convictions wisely.” What is it that we really want to teach? What is it that we really want to learn?

I think the process of coming to genuinely wise convictions is a long process of open-minded listening, learning, discussing, thinking, and experiencing, with lots of false starts, dead ends, reassessments, and breakthroughs. It entails the very process of freeing ourselves from the echo chamber that I’m talking about in this piece. It requires every bit of self-honesty we can muster. Are we willing to, as the Course asks us, “question every value that [we] hold” (T-24.In.2:1)? To the degree that are, we will be better able to convince others and ourselves of ideas that are truly worthy of us.

### **The Course’s approach to changing hearts and minds**

Assuming that in time we do develop relatively wise (even if imperfect) convictions that we *want* to reinforce by sharing them with others — convictions of love, forgiveness, and selfless service to our brothers and sisters in the family of God — how do we do that? How do we convince others (and thus more firmly convince ourselves) in a valid, healthy, and effective way? Again, I naturally turn to the Course for answers; I want to both discern what the Course counsels and notice what Jesus himself actually *does* as he teaches us in its pages. Based on what I’ve seen in the Course, I can think of three broad ways that it uses and advocates for the purpose of persuasion.

#### *Reason*

First, the Course uses and advocates *reason*. Although we’ve seen that reason and evidence aren’t sufficient in themselves, it must be said that the Course *does* use the entire intellectual toolkit in a truly masterful way. Clearly, one of the ways the Course uses to convince us of the validity of its thought system is through sheer force of rational argument. We at the Circle have covered this in many other articles, so I won’t go into detail here. But suffice to say that the author of the Course claims, in personal material given to Helen and Bill, that if we truly can get out of the echo chamber, rational argument really *will* convince us of the truth: “Whenever anyone can listen fairly to both sides of *any* issue, he will make the right decision. This is because he *has* the answer” (Urtext).

Okay, so the Course uses rational argument, but does that mean *we* should? Well, since the Course does say that our

teaching can be done “by formal means” (Urtext) and in “words” (M-In.2:9) (as well as many other forms), clearly we can use that intellectual toolkit as well. As I said earlier, I don’t think this means trying to preach to those who have no interest in our offerings. But I do think that, with the Holy Spirit’s guidance, it is perfectly valid and legitimate to use our power of reason to gently persuade those who have a genuine interest in what we have to say. Of course, I’m doing that in this very piece.

### *Motivation*

Second, the Course uses and advocates *motivation* — motivation that mainly takes the form of emphasizing the *benefits* of adopting the Course’s thought system. In a striking passage, the Course tells us that if a teacher can just motivate his pupil enough, that pupil *will* leave the echo chamber behind and accept what the teacher has to offer:

[For good teachers,] strengthening motivation for change is their first and foremost goal. It is also their last and final one. Increasing motivation for change in the learner is all that a teacher need do to guarantee change. (T-6.V.B.2:2-4)

The Course itself increases our motivation both by constantly extolling the benefits of accepting what it says — the peace, love, and joy that will be ours if we let its thought system all the way in — and by encouraging us to walk its path as instructed, so we will experience those benefits for ourselves. As Jesus tells us in the Text:

This course offers a very direct and a very simple learning situation, and provides the Guide Who tells you what to do. If you do it, you will see that it works. Its results are more convincing than its words. They will convince you that the words are true. (T-9.V.9:1-4)

Since strengthening motivation is said to be the primary task of “all good teachers” (T-6.V.B.2:1), surely this is something we all can do as we share our convictions with others. We too can extol the benefits of the Course for those who want to hear about it, and speak of how walking its path has blessed our lives. And for those who don’t want to hear about the Course, we can still share the benefits of love and forgiveness. Why not be like Mrs. Albert in the Urtext, a woman whose gentle and unabashed sharing of her loving convictions was regarded by Jesus as miraculous?

### *Demonstration*

Third, and above all, the Course uses and advocates *demonstration* — more than anything else, we convince others and ourselves of our highest and truest convictions (and any convictions, for that matter) by embodying them in ourselves. In the Course, we see this idea in many places, including two well-known passages:

Teaching is done in many ways, by formal means, by guidance, and above all *by example*. (Urtext version of T-5. IV.5:1)

To teach is to demonstrate. There are only two thought systems, and you demonstrate that you believe one or the other is true all the time. From your demonstration others learn, and so do you. (M-In.2:1-3)

This, to me, is the golden road out of the echo chamber, *the* way to really change hearts and minds. Yes, reason and motivation have their place, and an important place; we can’t do without them. But in my mind nothing convinces us more thoroughly than a person who is truly walking his or her talk.

In the Course, we see this demonstration most powerfully in the person of its author, Jesus: his demonstration of perfect love in his earthly life (especially in the “extreme example” [T-6.I.2:1] of his crucifixion), his demonstration of lovingly firm guidance as he worked with Helen and Bill, and his demonstration of transformative teaching combined with a practical program in the pages of the Course itself. He asks us to take him as our “model for learning” (T-6.In.2:1). What better model could we have?

Of course, there are other models all around us, beautiful exemplars of love and forgiveness. There are the ones everybody has heard of, like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Dalai Lama. There are the ones who are less famous but still somewhat known, like [Mother Antonia](#) and [Immaculée Ilibagiza](#). And there are the ones nobody has heard of who are working miracles every day. I love writing pieces about people like this precisely because I’m so inspired by them and want to hold them up as models for emulation, both for myself and others.

Recently, for instance, Robert shared the story of [Father Gregory Boyle](#), a Jesuit priest who has devoted his life to lov-

ingly helping and healing members of the street gangs of East Los Angeles. He has completely transformed the lives of countless people with his commitment to recognizing his “kinship” with everyone he encounters. When you see him speak and read his story, you can’t help but become more convinced that what the Course says about the limitless power of love is really true. Sure, people like Father Boyle and the others I’ve mentioned aren’t perfect, but in my eyes their examples of such extraordinary love point the way for us all. As the Course says, “We have witnesses. It is to them that wisdom should appeal” (M-23.6:2-3).

## **The most surprising validators of all**

After reading that New York *Times* article, I began to wonder about the relationship between the “surprising validator” phenomenon it describes and these extraordinary demonstrators of love. It does seem to me that the “surprising validator” concept makes sense as a means of persuasion (at least sometimes), and some of these people strike me as good examples of it. Mother Antonia, for instance, is an Irish-American divorcée with seven children, who grew up rich in Beverly Hills — not the sort of person you’d normally expect to become a nun and serve her brothers and sisters by going to live in a tiny cell in a squalid Mexican prison. The utterly unexpected nature of her calling is a big part of the impact of her story, at least for me.

But when I think about it more deeply, it seems to me that these extraordinary people are all “surprising validators” of a sort, even if what they do isn’t all that surprising on a form level (for instance, a Mexican farm worker like César Chávez helping Mexican farm workers). What’s surprising in all of these exemplars, it seems to me, is the most surprising validation of all: It is simply *the surprisingly extraordinary depth of their love*. We look at these people and think, “Wow, how can an ordinary human being do such things?” As a saying attributed to William Barclay puts it, “A saint is someone whose life makes it easier to believe in God.” Seeing people like this in action is enough to make us believe that perhaps there really is a loving God working through them — and perhaps, just perhaps, that same loving God might work through us too.

## **“A method of conversion”**

So, to return to the questions I raised at the beginning of this article: What can be done to truly uproot us from our entrenched positions? In a world that desperately needs a “better way,” how can we truly change hearts and minds, including our own? I think our best chance lies in developing our capacity to use all three of the means I’ve described here: reason, motivation, and demonstration. Indeed, when you look at extraordinary people like the ones I’ve highlighted, you see that they always use all three. It is this potent combination that breaks us out of our old entrenched ways and opens our minds to a whole new way of seeing and being.

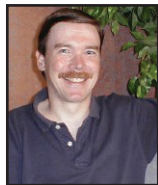
Developing this “method of conversion” will take time. As Course students, I think we do this mainly by walking the Course’s path day by day. In fact, while the three means I’ve discussed here are all over the Course, it could be said that each of the Course’s volumes focuses mainly on one of the three. The Text, the volume devoted to presenting the thought system, is a tour de force of rational argument which both begins to convince our minds of its truth and hones our own powers of reason. The Workbook, the volume devoted to practice, increases our motivation and thus our conviction by giving us (if we actually do it as instructed) a daily helping of the benefits the Course’s thought system brings. And the Manual for Teachers, the volume devoted to our role of teaching via extending miracles to others, is meant above all to help us demonstrate the fruits of the Course’s path to all the brothers to whom we are sent. It is in this demonstration that our own conviction finally becomes total, in which our own learning finally becomes complete.

Imagine what a powerful force for good you could be if you could really embody the whole package here. Let’s say that a suffering person comes to you for counsel, and that this person is open to what you have to offer. (To make this more personal, you might bring to mind someone in your life right now who is suffering in some way.) In this situation, perhaps you will be guided to offer counsel that uses reason to gently open the other person’s mind to a new way of seeing, a way that can alleviate her suffering. Normally (as we’ve seen) this might not be effective and could even further entrench the other person in her resistance. But in this case, your reasoning is reinforced by your generous sharing of the many benefits that this new way of seeing brings. This greatly increases her motivation to let her resistance go. And the counsel you offer is reinforced above all by your living demonstration of everything you are saying. You are not just mouthing empty platitudes; you are truly walking your talk, and it is obvious to all who look upon you.

Think about the effects of this. Would this not have the potential to free the other person from the echo chamber of her ego and bring about a truly transformative change of heart? And would her change of heart not further reinforce your own conviction, freeing you more completely from the echo chamber of *your* ego? In the end, would this exchange not “convert” both of you in the deepest sense imaginable? Would it not be the way out of suffering for both of you?

Indeed, I believe that this is how all of us are meant to use the power of persuasion. This is what we who have “no

choice” but to teach *should* be teaching. I’m convinced that the most powerful “method of conversion” that God has given us to change hearts and minds is those amazing teachers of humanity who give us reasons to believe in love, motivate us to partake of the benefits of love, and demonstrate love so powerfully that it can no longer be denied. Perhaps this is why the Course calls the plan for salvation “the plan of the teachers” (M-1.2:10). I long for the day when *A Course in Miracles* will produce such teachers. I hope that my own walking of the path will bring me closer to that lofty goal. How about you?



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

Greg Mackie has been a student of *A Course in Miracles* since 1991, and a teacher for the Circle of Atonement since 1999. He writes Course Q & A’s and “Course Meets World” articles for the Circle of Atonement’s website, and is one of the co-leaders of the Circle Course Community. He sees his primary function as helping to develop a tradition of Course scholarship.

## CIRCLE MAILBOX

*We received the following comments on Robert’s article entitled “The Power of the Mind and the Challenges of Our Lives: What Role Does One Play in the Other?” in A Better Way #118.*

I was originally born in Brazil and am American by choice. I have been a student of *A Course in Miracles* for about seven years. This article came to me at the right moment, and I love when you say or the Course says that trials are but lessons to learn, that the Holy Spirit sees them as lessons while the ego sees them as witnesses to it. I knew this, but you put it in such a better way. I thank you very much for this contribution to my understanding. My problem is that I always want to find what is wrong with me, and then I tell myself that I am not learning anything from what I study every day, and I become angry at myself. That is the witness that the ego wants. I do know that love is alive within me and my life has been a gift, and I am so grateful. Thank you for the article.

— *Ubi Pierson*

• • •

Thank you for your article on how to meet challenges in your life. It was terrific, and another gentle reminder, in a beautiful way, for me to remember “to not usurp the power of the Holy Spirit.”

— *Jane Walling*

• • •

I have forever been analytical, and I am an autodidactic intellectual. I love to work out mysteries, solve psychological problems, help people work through their issues, and most of all, experience miracles as I am able to change my mind. And I think this is why I so much enjoy reading your writings, as I identify with your process. After reading your latest article, “The Power of the Mind and the Challenges of Our Lives,” I discovered why.

Your latest article sent me on a daylong writing spree trying to place an image of a tombstone in front of me, which I could not do. You see, my issue is a physical malady brought on by cancer and a stroke. In both instances, the malady is focused in my throat. The cancer took away much of my saliva and the joy of eating, and the stroke took away my

ability to swallow. I tube fed for three years before regaining the ability to partially swallow. And my latest issue with eating has come about from the extraction of radiation-damaged teeth in order to fit dentures. For three months I have been unable to eat solid foods because of difficulties with the lower jaw. Thus, the tombstone couldn't be placed outside me. So, to project that tombstone (the witness) outward was impossible. What occurred was that I was able to imprison myself in the tombstone. And on the tombstone my epitaph read, "Here lies Hal, who can't figure out what it is he hasn't forgiven".

My writing, or brainstorming on paper, has always been successful in my attempts to get to the bottom of my inner workings. In this case I was following your suggestion about the tombstone, and nothing seemed to be working. I just wasn't getting that "aha" moment. So I went back to the effort to connect my maladies with my unforgiving. Now for years I have been unable to see the connection between my illnesses and that which I have not forgiven, until last night: "...that a careful study of the form a sickness takes will point quite clearly to the form of unforgiveness that it represents."

I love the way you attempt to connect the dots of *A Course in Miracles*, as it leads me to my own attempt to connect the dots to make sense of the writings in light of the ego's amazing ability to confuse us. And for the second time in as many months, what you wrote led me to look at something from a slightly different angle and experience the miracle.

As I lay encased in the tomb of the tombstone (what irony), I wrote down a list of my illnesses and the bodily defects they left behind. I also listed the effects these results had on my mental state and stared at them for quite awhile, trying to figure out what it was in my life I had not forgiven. My list of past pain and suffering was not that long, and I finally had a breakthrough. The breakthrough came as I asked the question "What is it that causes the most anger in my life?" I wrote, "People with wealth and power who take advantage of the less fortunate," which brought to light my younger years of living in poverty and my anger at the rest of the world for my misfortunes and all the other pain and suffering I encountered because of my poverty. I absolutely have a war going on with the rich and powerful, and especially the right-wing Republicans and their march towards even more power and wealth. This is why I am self-taught, why I see myself as an intellectual. This has been my defense and my weapon against those greedy, selfish rich people. How funny is that?

The dots suddenly connected, the light came on, and I heard the angels sing. My illnesses are a reflection of my attacks on the illusory wealthy and powerful. I am the powerful inflicting damage on and bringing pain and suffering to my powerless body. I was going after their throats by choking them or starving them to death, and the witness to my anger and unforgiving was my own pain and suffering. Now comes the easy part as I hand over my anger, my resentment, and my desire for revenge to the Holy Spirit. Its time to choose again. Halleluiah! Thank you Jesus...

Oh, and don't forget to thank Robert. Thank you, Robert.

— *Hal Seeley*

• • •

I had to write and tell you how helpful your article in *A Better Way* #118 was to me. I am often upset about many of the awful news stories I'm bombarded with on a daily basis — one in particular that was so disturbing that I find it difficult to stop thinking of it. I kept reading the lesson to help me see the real world. It wasn't helping.

After reading your article and seeing the exercise at the end, I realize why none of my thoughts are going away. The exercise is a perfect way for me to rid myself of the painful thoughts and see these incidents in a light of love. I printed this out today and will do this exercise daily. I believe this will help me to see love and eventually start seeing the real world.

This has been my desire for some time, and you have helped me on my way to this longed-for journey. I thank you.

— *Eleanor Stone*