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A BETTER WAY

Unloosening the Chains of Time The Practice of Letting Go of the Previous Hour and Blessing the Hour to Come

by Greg Mackie

I don't know about you, but to be perfectly honest, I often find daily life to be a tiring affair. Even though I have a good life with much to be thankful for, the business of living can really wear me down. Based on the way I hear others talk about their lives, it seems I am not alone in this sentiment. As we endure the "school of hard knocks," run the "rat race," slave away in the "salt mines," and see our best-laid plans waylaid again and again, the hope of our early lives can give way to weary resignation. It's as if we're oxen chained to a cart piled high with a heavy load of rocks, dragging a burden that just gets heavier and heavier over time as more and more rocks are piled onto it.

Wouldn't it be great if there were a way to unchain ourselves from that cartload of rocks and free ourselves from the heavy cumulative burdens of life? *A Course in Miracles* offers such a way, promising us that under its guidance we will "travel light and journey lightly" (T-13.VII.13:4) on a path so gentle that it will feel "as if [we] were being carried down a quiet path in summer" (T-14.IV.6:2). In this article, I want to share a particular practice, rooted in the Course, that is helping me leave that heavy burden behind and journey more lightly on that gentler path. This is the hourly practice of letting go of the previous hour and blessing the hour to come.

The burden of a typical day in a typical life

Think for a moment about the typical day many of us experience. True, what follows doesn't describe everyone's experience all the time. Some of us are happier than others, and hopefully we're all on our way to happier days, especially if we're doing our Course practice. But I think days like what I'm describing here are still all too common for many of us. See if this is an accurate description of your typical day, to one degree or another.

At the beginning of the day, we make our plans for what to do and hope everything will go the way we want. But of course, what happens most of the time is that our plans don't work out and lots of things don't go the way we want. As the day goes on and our plans continue to get thwarted hour by hour, our frustration accumulates. What's more, our resentment toward the people and things we blame for thwarting our plans also accumulates. The weight of all this frustration and resentment grows and grows until by the end of the day, we're wiped out. Flopping into an easy chair and wiping our brow, we exclaim, "Oh, what an exhausting day!"

We try to unwind with a drink, a movie, a relaxing evening at home. For a more extended unwinding, we take vacations to get away from it all. And of course we dream of retirement, when we'll be able to relax at last. Unfortunately, we have too many days like this. The nights out and vacations are just temporary respites from a burden that grows larger and larger day in and day out. And when we finally do retire, all too often we find that we keep on having versions of this same day. After all, things still don't go the way we plan, and there are still plenty of people who get in the way of what we want. Our frustration and resentment just keep growing. Is there any way out?

A practice to unchain ourselves from the burden

As I mentioned, the Course as a whole offers a way to unchain ourselves from this burden. It holds out to us a care-free life immersed in God's loving care; as a favorite line of mine puts it, "In Him you have no cares and no concerns, no burdens, no anxiety, no pain, no fear of future and no past regrets" (W-pI.109.5:1). Who would not want *this*? Thus, when Robert presented a class on hourly practice during our teacher training program, I was especially drawn to those hourly Workbook practices in which we ask God to help us let go of the previous hour and to guide us in the hour to come. Here, it seemed to me, was a practical way to actually live, hour by hour, that carefree life the Course promises.

With that in mind, I'd like to describe the practice I've been doing on the hour. I'm doing post-Workbook practice, so it has been fairly easy to integrate this into my overall practice routine (which also includes morning and evening quiet times, frequent reminders throughout the hour, and response to temptation). It only takes five minutes more or less, the same time as those hourly practices in Lessons 93-110, and of course I don't do the whole thing when I genuinely don't have the time on a particular hour — in those cases, as the Workbook instructs, I do a much briefer practice. (Sometimes I'll do the full version at another time during the hour.)

Now, to be perfectly honest, I'm not always consistent with this, even when I do have the time. But I've been relatively consistent, and this form of practice has helped lighten the load of my life significantly, so much so that it is difficult for me to imagine a better use for those few minutes. Here, then, is a summary of my practice on the hour.

1. Thank God for the blessings of the previous hour

This is based on a practice instruction from Lesson 153, a practice that in the Workbook we "maintain for quite a while" (W-pI.153.15:1):

And we will quietly sit by and wait on Him and listen to His Voice...while thanking Him for all the gifts He gave us in the [hour] gone by. (W-pI.153.17:2)

This doesn't take too much time. I bring God to mind, take a moment to reflect on the events of the previous hour, and thank Him for whatever blessings He placed in those events, whether I'm currently aware of those blessings or not.

I find that this helps to undo the frustration stemming from my thwarted plans. For of course, my problem is that those plans were *my* plans, not God's. Who cares if *my* plans were thwarted? The good news is that whatever happened in that previous hour, whether it met with my approval or not, was woven into *God's* plan for salvation, the only plan that matters. Whatever happened was God's gift, a blessing, and I can let that blessing in if I have eyes to see it. Thanking God for the blessings of the previous hour helps open my eyes.

2. Ask God for help in forgiving the upsetting events of the previous hour

This practice is based on an instruction from Lesson 193, which in the Workbook we are meant to follow not only that day but "in the days to come" (W-pI.193.12:1):

Each hour, spend a little time today, and in the days to come, in practicing the lesson in forgiveness in the form established for the day. And try to give it application to the happenings the hour brought, so that the next one is free of the one before. (W-pI.193.12:1-2)

Most of the time, this doesn't take too long either. I scan my mind quickly for upsets from the previous hour; how long I take depends on the time I have available and how much I have to forgive. Sometimes nothing especially upsetting happened in the previous hour. But if something especially upsetting did happen and I have the time, I might spend longer with this part of the practice. I ask God for help in seeing the upsetting person or thing with the eyes of Christ, perhaps with the help of my daily practice line (see next step below) or another favorite Course practice, and in this way try to bring about at least *some* shift in my perception of the upset.

I find that this helps undo my resentment toward the people and things that thwart my plans. For of course, whenever my plans go awry, in my mind it's rarely just *my* responsibility; there's usually someone or something else I hold at least partly responsible for it. Therefore there is someone or something I resent and need to forgive. And even in those situations where something happened that I *know* was fully my responsibility, there is someone to forgive: in those situations, I use direct self-forgiveness.

I see both of these practices applied to the previous hour as a powerful twofold way to "purify" that hour. I clean up that hour both by asking God to help me let go of my resentment toward upsetting people/events *and* by asking Him

to help me see the blessings those people and events really offered me. By the end of this purifying process, I've moved at least a little closer to seeing that hour the way the Course would have me see *all* of the past: "All your past except its beauty is gone, and nothing is left but a blessing" (T-5.IV.8:2).

3. *Spend a quiet moment with God by doing an hourly remembrance*

Then I move into my regular hourly practice. As I mentioned earlier, I am doing post-Workbook practice this year, so I practice with a Course line chosen at the beginning of the day. This year, Patricia and I are going through *The Song of Prayer*, reading a paragraph each morning and choosing a line that appeals to us as the line to practice for that day.

This practice only takes a minute or so, and consists of simply repeating the line and dwelling on its meaning, bringing God to mind and spending a quiet moment with Him. And as I mentioned, sometimes I'll use my daily practice line to help me with the process of forgiving the events of the previous hour. Today is a good example: The *Song of Prayer* line Patricia and I are using is "Forgive [your 'enemies'] for your sins, and you will be forgiven indeed" (S-1.II.6:8), which has obvious application to upsetting people and situations.

4. *Ask God for guidance about what to do in the hour to come*

At the beginning of the day I always ask God for guidance about what to do that day, in the spirit of that well-known injunction from the "Rules for Decision" section, "Today, I will make no decisions by myself" (T-30.I.2:2). This hourly version is a miniature renewal of that commitment to follow His guidance, based on an instruction from Lesson 153 (another part of which we saw earlier):

And we will quietly sit by and wait on Him and listen to His Voice, and learn what He would have us do the hour that is yet to come. (W-pI.153.17:2)

This usually does not take too long either. I mentally scan the next hour and ask within about what to do. Of course, my reception of guidance is quite fallible, but I try my best to get an inner sense of what I should do. If I'm in the middle of an activity I've already felt guided to do, that sense may well be simply to continue that activity. During those times when one activity is concluding and it's time to transition into something else, though, my asking may take more time.

5. *Thank God in advance for the blessings of the hour to come*

This isn't based on a particular Workbook practice instruction, but it feels appropriate given lessons like Lesson 232, in which we pray to God, "And let me not forget my hourly thanksgiving that You have remained with me, and always will be there to hear my call to You and answer me" (W-pII.232.1:2). For me, it is the bookend to the first step of thanking God for the blessings of the previous hour. Just as previous hour was filled with His blessings whether I was aware of them or not, so will the next. Combined with asking for guidance, it "purifies" the hour to come just as the earlier practices "purified" the hour gone by. It is a great way to pre-empt my frustrations and resentments before they have a chance to even get started.

My results so far: my yoke is easier and the burden lighter

I'm just getting started with this practice, so I only have preliminary results to report. But while the results are preliminary, they've been very positive. So far, so good.

Regarding the practices applied to the past hour: I feel good thanking God for His blessings. It casts a kind of glow on the hour, reminding me that every hour, even the most mundane, has its (often unexpected) gifts. This actually helps prepare me for the next step of forgiving the upsets, which aren't quite as upsetting when I remember the blessings. These practices help me see that, as Lesson 193 says, "There is a way to look on everything that lets it be to [me] another step to Him, and to salvation of the world" (W-pI.193.13:1).

Regarding the practices applied to the next hour: Asking for guidance in the hour to come has been a real godsend. A number of times I have received what felt like unexpected guidance to do things that had positive results. Interestingly, I've found myself more often doing things that I would normally tend to put off, especially things that are helpful to other people. In general, I'm reaching out to others more. And thanking God in advance for His blessings casts that same glow of the past hour onto the next. It puts me into a positive frame of mind.

The combination of these practices has given me some unexpected gifts. One is that it helps me with the problem of missed practice periods. I'll forgive myself for the practice lapses of the previous hour (or hours), and then when I ask for guidance for the hour to come, I'll resolve to get my practice back on track in that hour. This is, of course, the very practice Lesson 95 counsels for missed practice periods: Forgive yourself for lapses so that you can get back to practicing right away.

I've successfully used this method to rescue some practice days that had gone awry.

But of course, the big payoff of the combination has been to lighten the cumulative burdens of frustration and resentment. To bring back the oxcart analogy: The first phase of the hourly practice helps unload the rocks dumped into the cart the previous hour, while the second phase helps prevent too many new rocks from being dumped into the cart the next hour. The goal is that by the time I get to the next hour, the burden I'll have to unload will be lighter. And to a certain degree, I feel like this goal is being accomplished. Things don't accumulate quite as much as they did before.

I'm finding that this practice is making me more attentive, more self-aware, and more aware of the needs of other people. Whereas before I could easily slip into the fog of business as usual, I'm finding that now I'm more conscious of what I'm doing. I'm even more attentive when it comes to doing my other Course practices, like frequent reminders and response to temptation. My practice on the hour fuels my practice during the rest of the hour.

Finally, as a result of all of this, I really am feeling, to paraphrase Jesus from the gospels, that my yoke is easier and the burden lighter. I'm less weighed down, less tired than before. And sometimes, when the practice is really going well, I have stretches of real joy, real liberation. Perhaps life really can be a lot easier than I ever thought possible.

A new kind of day in a new kind of life: traveling light and journeying lightly

Imagine the kind of day we could have if we did this every hour. At the beginning of the day, we ask God for guidance about what to do and trust that He has blessed the day. We carry out His plans each hour to the best of our ability. Of course, even then, many unexpected things will happen, and we may find frustration and resentment creeping in as a result. But each hour is a "clean, untarnished birth" (T-15.I.8:4), for each hour we thank God for His blessings, ask His help in forgiving our resentments, spend a quiet moment with Him, ask His guidance for the next hour, and thank Him for the blessings to come. Thus as the day goes on, we don't accumulate the burden of frustration and resentment. We feel light, energized, grateful, and inspired: "Oh, what a wonderful day!"

At the end of this kind of day, we won't need to unwind. While we might still take vacations for many reasons, we won't need to get away from it all. (I'm reminded of Peace Pilgrim's response to someone who asked her if she needed a vacation from her nonstop pilgrimage for peace: "Most people interested in vacations are those who are doing things they are not called to do...I couldn't imagine feeling the need of a vacation from my pilgrimage.") And while we may eventually retire in the conventional sense, we will have no need to retire from doing the function God has called us to do. Why would we want to? We travel light and journey lightly, as the Course has promised us, and we rest in God's calm assurance that "This is as every day should be" (W-pI.232.2:1).

Unloosening the chains of time

If this practice sounds appealing to you, I suggest that you give it a try. Again, the whole thing needn't take more than five minutes, and you can do shorter versions when you truly cannot take that much time as the hour strikes, just as we do in Lessons 93-110. (Or do the fuller version at a more convenient time within the hour.) Here is a summary of the practice:

- 1. Thank God for the blessings of the previous hour*
- 2. Ask God for help in forgiving the upsetting events of the previous hour*
- 3. Spend a quiet moment with God by doing an hourly remembrance*
- 4. Ask God for guidance about what to do in the hour to come*
- 5. Thank God in advance for the blessings of the hour to come*

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could have this kind of day and have this kind of life? Wouldn't it be a blessed relief to unchain ourselves from those wearying burdens and live joyous lives in which we "smile on everyone we see, and walk with lightened footsteps as we go to do what is appointed us to do" (W-pI.123.4:3)? That's the life I would like to lay hold of through this practice and through walking the path of the Course as a whole. May we all lay hold of the promise of the Course that

The chains of time are easily loosened in this way. Let no one hour cast its shadow on the one that follows, and when that one goes, let everything that happened in its course go with it. Thus will you remain unbound, in peace eternal in the world of time. (W-pI.193.12:3-5)



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CIRCLE MAILBOX

We received the following comments on Greg's article entitled "A Method of Conversion: Thoughts on How to Truly Change Hearts and Minds" in A Better Way #119.

I feel you are working too hard with this. From long experience of life I know there is generally no point in trying to "convince" people of anything. The Course says that to teach is to demonstrate. If we could put the teaching of the Course into practice, to that extent we would be demonstrating its teaching of forgiveness in a myriad of ways, all day, every day of our lives, even in ways we are not consciously aware of. There is a lifetime of effort here, but we start with ourselves.

Here is some guidance given to Helen who was asking Jesus how to help someone and what to say to him:

Do not forget if you attempt to solve a problem, you have judged it for yourself and so you have betrayed your proper role....Remember you need nothing, but you have an endless store of loving gifts to give. But teach this lesson only to yourself. Your brother will not learn it from your words or from the judgments you have laid on him. You need not even speak a word to him. You cannot ask, "What shall I say to him?" and hear God's answer. Rather ask instead, "Help me to see this brother through the eyes of truth and not of judgment," and the help of God and all His angels will respond (*Absence from Felicity*, p. 381).

"This is a very simple Course."

— Mary

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Just finished your latest article in *A Better Way*. I thought it was outstanding. Enough said.

— Kathy Smith