



## Jesus as Therapist

### The Discourse about Bill's Parents

by Robert Perry

What would it be like to have the author of the Course speak to us personally about a situation we are wrestling with? What would it be like to have him as our therapist, so that he could guide us through the process of identifying and then relinquishing a belief that has been hurting us for years?

Perhaps the closest we will come to knowing what this would be like is found in guidance that Jesus gave Bill Thetford through Helen Schucman during the dictation of what is now Chapter 3 of the Text. The guidance is about Bill's parents; specifically, his experience of feeling wounded by his parents' low opinion of him. In this article, I would like to go through this guidance line by line, attempting to draw out both its message and the various devices Jesus uses to get that message to go in.

#### The historical approach

Any form of mental illness can truthfully be described as an expression of viciousness. We said before that those who are afraid are apt to be vicious. If we were willing to forgive other people's misperceptions of us, they could not possibly affect us at all.

In these opening lines, Jesus is setting up the discourse that is to follow. He begins by sounding a note that will become central to his discourse, a note about the real, underlying cause of our suffering. We seem to be at the mercy of forces beyond our control. We seem to suffer at the hands of others. If we are mentally ill, it seems to be because the outrageous fortunes of heredity and environment have caused us to fall apart under the awful weight of life.

Yet the truth is actually the reverse, Jesus says. The real story behind our suffering is not our victimhood, but rather our own viciousness. It is the root cause of any mental illness we have. And it, in the form of unforgiveness, is what makes us feel vulnerable to the opinions of others. Without our viciousness, we would forgive, and if we forgave, we would discover that "people's misperceptions of us...could not possibly affect us at all."

There is little doubt that you can explain your present attitudes in terms of how people used to look at you, but there is no wisdom in doing so. In fact, the whole historical approach can justifiably be called doubtful.

Jesus here is implicitly acknowledging the evidence that Bill sees. Bill sees a correlation between how people used to see him and his own present attitudes, and Jesus clearly agrees that this correlation is there. Yet he denies the causal link between the two: Their past perceptions did not *cause* his present attitudes.

This implies that "the whole historical approach"—in which you delve into your personal history to uncover the roots of your current makeup—has "no wisdom" and is flatly "doubtful." In a later discourse, Jesus will make this point again, saying to Helen and Bill, "You both went over your childhoods in some detail and at considerable expense, and it merely encouraged your egos to become more tolerable to you." In other words, when you explain your current ego as the result of your childhood, you merely make that ego seem justified, inevitable, and inescapable. You come to tolerate it, but at the cost of feeling trapped in it.

As you have so often said, no one has adopted *all* of his parents' attitudes as his own. In every case, there has been a long process of choice, in which the individual has escaped from those he himself vetoed, while retaining those he voted *for*.

Jesus now calls upon an observation that Helen has made. She has observed that wedged in between the attitudes of an individual's parents and the attitudes that individual holds now lies a crucial middle term: the individual's own choice. Only those parental attitudes the individual votes to retain are in fact retained. Those he vetoes disappear from his belief system. Real causation, then, lies in that middle term—in the hands of the individual himself.

Bill has not retained his parents political beliefs, in spite of the particular kind of newspapers that constituted their own reading matter in this area. The reason why he could do this was because he believed he was free in this area.

Now Jesus provides a specific example from Bill's own life. Bill chose against his parents' political beliefs, even while surrounded by newspapers that reinforced those beliefs. This proves that he possesses the very power that Jesus is talking about—the power to veto or to retain. And this power means that he is free to veto even his parents' seemingly weightier beliefs about his lack of worth.

### **“Eager to accept their misperception”**

There must be some acute problem *of his own* that would make him so eager to accept their misperception of his own worth.

Having established that Bill must have voted to retain his parents' “misperception of his own worth,” Jesus now zeroes in on the real question: Why on earth would Bill do such a thing? The only reasonable explanation is that Bill must have “some acute problem *of his own*.” Now we are down to the heart of the matter: There is something wrong *inside Bill* that leads him to embrace his parents' poor evaluations of him. What can that thing be?

This tendency can *always* be regarded as punitive.

We have now circled back to the viciousness mentioned at the start. When Jesus says “punitive,” he clearly means that Bill wants to punish *his parents*. And the way he does this is precisely by eagerly accepting “their misperception of his own worth.” This allows his parents' misperception to hurt him, and this in turn makes his parents “guilty” of his wounds. It's as if Bill's parents hold a toy gun in their hands, and then Bill himself shouts “Bang!” and squirts ketchup all over himself and screams, “Oh my God! Look what you've done!”

This is clearly the exact same idea that we find later in the Text, where Jesus says that all suffering we experience in the special relationship is “an attack on the self to make the other guilty” (T-16.V.1:4). “The Picture of Crucifixion” (T-27.I) elaborates on this same idea, with its vivid image of us consenting to suffer so that we can hold a picture of our crucifixion before our brother's eyes and announce, “Behold me brother, at your hand I die” (T-27.I.4:6).

The idea that all our suffering at the hands of another is “an attack on the self to make the other guilty” is a hard message, yet notice how profoundly it undermines the attractiveness (not to mention the *truth*) of the victim stance. The perceived benefit of being the victim lies in the notion that you have suffered innocently, and thus deserve sympathy from onlookers and restitution from your attacker. Jesus, however, says no, you have done this to yourself in order to frame others (in Bill's case, his parents) for a crime they did not commit. You have hurt yourself out of a malicious wish to prove their guilt.

If that is true, then you clearly deserve neither sympathy nor restitution. What value is left, then, in being a victim?

It cannot be justified by the inequality of the strengths of parents and children. This is never more than temporary, and is largely a matter of maturational and thus physical difference. It does not last unless it is held onto.

We can almost hear Bill's objection to the foregoing: But how could I *not* internalize my parents' view of me when they were so much bigger and more mature than me? Jesus now answers this unspoken objection, and his answer has an undeniable logic to it: At some point, those differences passed away. And when they were gone, the only thing keeping your parents' view of you lodged in your mind was your own *will* to hold it there.

### **The “destruction” of Bill's office**

When Bill's father came to his new office and “destroyed” it, it is quite apparent that Bill *must* have been

willing to let it be destroyed. The many times that he has commented on this event alone would suggest the extreme importance of this misperception in his own distorted thinking.

Jesus now brings up an extreme example of the very principle he is talking about: Bill's father "destroying" his office. As the quotation marks around "destroyed" suggest, it was almost certainly a *verbal* trashing of Bill's office, which merely "destroyed" the office in Bill's mind. After all, Jesus' overall point is about Bill's willingness to let his parents' *perceptions* dictate his own perceptions. In *A Course in Miracles: The Lives of Helen Schucman and Bill Thetford*, Neal Vahle provides more detail on this event:

Evidently Bill's father, who was poorly educated, was unable to comprehend the earning power that a Ph.D. gave Bill. In what presumably was a fit of anger about Bill's choice of vocation, he went into Bill's office, probably at the University of Chicago, and destroyed it. This incident underscored the tension that continued to exist between father and son after Bill had moved into his twenties. (p. 46)

This tells us two things: First, Bill's father "trashed" his office out of a complete lack of comprehension of the money and prestige that went along with that office. Second, this took place many years before this guidance from Jesus, which means that Bill was still bringing up the incident years later. Now we can see the highly pertinent statement that this example makes. At the time of the office incident, Bill was no longer a child. He was a full-grown man, fully able to see that his father was just out to lunch in this case. Yet for some reason, Bill treated his father's reaction as carrying enormous weight, and then hung onto that reaction, actively reinforcing the supposed gravity of it for years afterward.

Here, then, is strong evidence of exactly what Jesus is saying: that the real story is something in Bill, something that is strangely *voting to retain* the hurtful misperceptions of his parents.

Why should anyone accord an obvious misperception so much power?

Rhetorical questions are tremendously useful tools for moving minds. They force the listener to look within and see the truth of the implied answer for himself. The rhetorical question that Jesus has just asked is one that cries out to be asked. In response, we can almost hear Bill's thoughts saying, "You know, he's right. Why *should* anyone do that? Why am *I* doing it?"

There cannot be any real justification for it, because even Bill himself recognized the real problem by saying "How could he do this to me?" The answer is *he* didn't.

We can see here another device that Jesus is using. In this case, he is quoting something Bill himself said and using it to support the case he is making. His point is that Bill's question—"How could he do this to me?"—contained more recognition than Bill realized. When you ask a "how could you?" question, you are really saying, "This makes so little sense that it's shocking that it could even happen." Jesus is basically saying, "You're right. In fact, it so utterly lacks all sense that it *couldn't* happen. Your father couldn't do this to you."

Jesus' final line above ("The answer is *he* didn't") is one of the most powerful in the whole discourse. Anyone who has ever felt like Bill would feel hit between the eyes by it. As we saw, Bill's question recognized that his father doing this to him was so nonsensical as to be bordering on the impossible. What he didn't recognize is what Jesus now in effect tells him: "Only *you* could do this to you."

### **"A very serious question to ask himself"**

Bill has a very serious question to ask himself in this connection.

Now Jesus is going to give Bill a question for reflection, another effective device to induce a change of mind. But first he needs to set the question up so that Bill can appreciate its full import.

We said before that the purpose of the Resurrection was to "demonstrate that no amount of misperception has any influence at all on a Son of God."

Here, Jesus uses yet another effective device for bringing about change: He tells a story from his own experience that demonstrates the very truth he is teaching to Bill. His resurrection, he says, was a demonstration that no one's perceptions of us can have any effect on us, because we are the Sons of God. If all the seemingly horrific things that were done to Jesus

had no effect on that Son of God, then how could what Bill's parents did to him have any effect on *this* Son of God?

Now the concept of invulnerability is not just words. It is backed up by a real-life demonstration, one that was performed by the very person that is teaching Bill right now.

This demonstration *exonerates* those who misperceive, by establishing beyond doubt that they have *not* hurt anyone.

Jesus now draws out the implications of his demonstration. If his resurrection showed that a Son of God cannot be hurt, then those who *seemed* to hurt him are exonerated. How can they be held responsible for a hurt that they did not cause?

Bill's question, which he must ask himself very honestly, is whether he is willing to demonstrate that his parents have *not* hurt him. Unless he is willing to do this, he has not forgiven them.

After providing context, Jesus is now able to come back to the question that Bill needs to ask himself. The question amounts to this: Am I willing to follow the example of Jesus' resurrection and demonstrate that my parents have *not* hurt me? To get a feel of the effectiveness of the question, try asking it of yourself in relation to someone you see as having hurt you. Ask yourself, "Am I willing to *demonstrate* that [blank] has not hurt me?" Don't ask it quickly and lightly. Treat it as a "very serious question," one that you ask yourself "very honestly."

Jesus' point is that if something in you holds back, if you can't quite bring yourself to say a wholehearted yes, then it means you have not forgiven this person. It points to a lovelessness in your own heart that is there independently of anything that has been done to you.

### **"He is *not* an image"**

The essential goal of therapy is the same as that of knowledge.

You could say that Jesus is ganging up on Bill here. What he is about to say is coming not just from the Course ("knowledge") but also from psychotherapy. On this issue, then, the strange new spiritual teaching that has entered Bill's life (the Course) is in full agreement with his long-time commitment (psychotherapy). How can Bill deny both?

No one can survive independently as long as he is willing to see himself through the eyes of others. This will always put him in a position where he *must* see himself in different lights.

This is what the Course and psychotherapy both agree on: If you are willing to see yourself through the eyes of others, you will necessarily see yourself in a number of different lights. You will not be your own independent person. You'll be a mere puppet on a whole forest of strings pulling you in a myriad of directions. The simple logic of this is undeniable. Here, then, we see another part of the cost of Bill's belief in being at the mercy of the perceptions of others.

Parents do not create the image of their children, though they [the parents] may perceive images which they do create. However, as we have already said, you are not an image. If you *side with* image-makers, you are merely being idolatrous.

We can see these comments in terms of series of steps. Even though your parents carried their own self-made image of you, they did not make your image of you. You did that. Yet even your image of you is not the truth, for you are not an image. Given all this, there is literally no basis for adopting your parents' image of you.

The comment that "If you *side with* image-makers, you are merely being idolatrous" is a play on words. The Second Commandment says, "You shall not make for yourself a carved image"—an idol (Exodus 20:4). Jesus' point is that siding with anyone's image of you is like making a false image of God. You have replaced divinity (in this case, your own) with a mere image. Can we apply this to ourselves? Can we accept that when we identify with an image of ourselves we are just like believers in ancient times who prayed to little wooden idols?

Bill has no justification whatever for perpetuating *any* image of himself at all. He is *not* an image. Whatever is true of him is wholly benign.

So identifying with an image of yourself is not only idolatrous, it also somehow means that you are not “benign.” To appreciate this, we have to think about what an image is. An image is a surface that is publicly viewed. It thus exists in the eyes of many beholders. And as those eyes behold it, they evaluate it, comparing it to other images and judging it against their standard.

Thus, when you see yourself as an image, you become no more than a paper-thin mask in a giant marketplace stacked with countless other masks. You sit there on your crowded shelf, desperately hoping that the shoppers’ unpredictable gaze will notice you and judge you worthy. In this scenario, as you privately wish that your image is selected while others are rejected, can you truly be said to be *benign*?

To be an image, then, means to be a visible, vulnerable, and malign *surface*. By extension, to not be an image would mean that you are an invisible, invulnerable, and purely benign *depth*. Which one would you rather be?

Jesus is thus giving Bill a radically new concept of himself. He is not saying, “Wouldn’t you rather be your *own* image?” Rather, he is saying, “Wouldn’t you rather *not* be an image?”

It is essential that he *know* this about himself, but he cannot know it while he chooses to interpret himself as vulnerable enough to *be* hurt.

Having held out to Bill this lofty and beautiful new concept of himself, Jesus now tells him that he cannot truly lay hold of it until he lets go of the old concept. It is an either-or situation. As long as Bill sees himself as vulnerable to the opinions of others, he will not *know* that he is not an image.

### Simple spite

This is a peculiar kind of arrogance, whose narcissistic component is perfectly obvious. It endows the perceiver with sufficient unreal strength to make him over, and then acknowledges the perceiver’s miscreation.

Feeling vulnerable is *arrogant*? And *narcissistic*? How can that be? Jesus explains: When we feel vulnerable to what others think of us, it’s as if we are waving a magic wand and endowing them with a power they don’t have, the power to make us over. Then once they use that power to demean us, we give their misperception our stamp of approval: “Yes, you’re absolutely right. I really am a worthless nobody.” Who do we think we are to magically grant them this power and certify their use of it—God? And who plays God but an arrogant narcissist?

There are times when this strange lack of real courtesy appears to be a form of humility. Actually, it is never more than simple spite.

Jesus continues to explode the myth of the innocence of victimhood. It certainly does seem humble to bow to someone’s negative perception of us. Even though our pride may balk, we feel duty-bound to hang our head and admit they are right. What could be more humble than that? Yet Jesus has a very different interpretation. He calls embracing another’s unloving view of us a “strange lack of real courtesy” and “simple spite.” This recalls, of course, the earlier statement “This tendency can *always* be regarded as punitive.” This is an extremely difficult message to really accept. Yet if the other person didn’t actually hurt us, if we hurt ourselves in order to fabricate proof of her guilt, then how can we possibly call that courtesy? Isn’t “simple spite” the appropriate term to use?

### “It is your *duty*”

Bill, your parents did misperceive you in many ways, but their ability to perceive was quite warped, and their misperceptions stood in the way of their own knowledge. There is no reason why it should stand in the way of yours. It is still true that you believe they *did* something to you. This belief is extremely dangerous to your perception, and wholly destructive of your knowledge.

Jesus acknowledges that Bill is not wrong in what he saw: his parents did misperceive him. But their misperceptions, Jesus says, came out of a diminished capacity to perceive and in turn blocked their way to knowledge. Their misperceptions, in other words, had a *damaged source* and a *damaging result* inside their own minds. But there is no reason why their misperceptions should have a damaging result inside *Bill’s*. They can only do that if Bill *chooses* that they do. And why on earth would he do that? Yet that is exactly what he *is* doing when he believes they “*did* something” to him.

This is not only true of your attitudes toward your parents, but also of your misuse of your friends.

Having further articulated the cost of Bill's belief in vulnerability (damage to his perception and destruction of his knowledge), Jesus now expands the scope of this belief. It covers not just his parents, but also his friends. By seeing himself as vulnerable to his friends' opinions of him, he is actually *misusing* them.

You still think that you *must* respond to their errors *as if* they were true. By reacting self-destructively, you are *giving* them approval for their misperceptions.

Of course, we are all like Bill. When someone perceives us incorrectly, we tend to think we have to respond to that person's error as if it were true. We forget that in the end only truth has power, which means that error is powerless.

Jesus' second sentence presents a particularly absurd picture of our response. When someone's ego paints an ugly portrait of us, rather than seeing that portrait as simply mistaken and hence irrelevant, we treat it as gospel, thereby injuring ourselves and showering the painter with approval for his cruel artwork. Does any of that make sense?

No one has the right to change himself according to different circumstances. Only his actions are capable of appropriate variation. His belief in himself is a constant, unless it rests on perceptual acuity rather than knowledge of what he is.

Acting like that ugly portrait of you is accurate amounts to acting like you have the right to change yourself as each new erroneous opinion of you blows your way. And how can you have that right? What you are is set. If you really knew what you are, your belief in yourself would be as constant as your being itself is. If, on the other hand, you change your mind about what you are every five minutes, what can that mean but that you don't know and are just guessing?

We now come to the final line of this discourse (before it switches gears to talk about another issue of Bill's: his fear of being a classroom teacher), which takes everything Jesus has said and boils it all down to a single powerful injunction:

It is your *duty* to establish beyond doubt that you are totally unwilling to side with (identify with) anyone's misperceptions of you, including your own.

This statement completely turns the tables on our conventional belief that we are often duty-bound to embrace others' misperceptions of us. We'd prefer not to embrace them, of course, but we just don't feel we have permission. Jesus says no, you have far more than permission to reject their unloving view of you; it is your *duty*. And by using words like "beyond doubt," "totally," and "anyone's," he makes it clear that this duty is *absolute*—absolutely certain and absolutely without exception. Being without exception, it is not good enough to replace their loveless images of you with your own. Nothing is good enough in this case but the truth, and the truth is that *you are not an image*.

The above statement can be an extremely effective line to practice. You might want to try doing so now. Think of someone who sees you as less than worthy, and say to yourself, slowly and with emphasis, "It is my *duty* to establish beyond doubt that I am totally unwilling to side with (identify with) anyone's misperceptions of me, including my own." See if you don't stand a little taller afterwards.

This doesn't mean, by the way, that this person's specific point is false (you may in fact leave the toilet seat up!). It means that the essence of it—the idea that you lack worth—is false. It is this essence that you are duty-bound to reject.

## Conclusion

I began by asking what it would be like to have the author of the Course as our therapist. We now can stand back, survey all that we've seen, and try to answer that question. Two things stand out to me.

First, he wades into a common topic in therapy—our victimization at the hands of our parents and their responsibility for our current makeup—and delivers a truly radical message. Our parents did not actually do anything to us, he says, and they are not the cause of how we turned out. We are that cause. Any hurt we experienced was a case of us freely electing to internalize their misperceptions of us. And we did that for reasons that are anything but innocent. We did it out of the spiteful impulse to frame our parents for a crime they did not commit. We did it because our ego is fundamentally vicious. Yet we need not let this viciousness direct the astounding power of our mind. We can use that same power to reject our belief that we are vulnerable, to reject our parents' unloving images of us, and to even reject our own. For

we are not an image.

This message is so incredibly far from what we normally believe that it may seem hopelessly impractical. How can one embrace such a radical set of ideas on anything but a purely intellectual level? How can one allow these ideas to produce real emotional change?

That leads us to the second characteristic of Jesus as therapist that strikes me: He uses a long list of devices that allow his radical message to go in, including (but not limited to) the following: He calls upon examples from Bill's life. He draws upon the commonsense observation of a friend (Helen). He shows the many heavy costs of Bill's current belief. He asks Bill a rhetorical question. He gives Bill a question for personal reflection. He reveals the hidden recognition in one of Bill's own statements. He offers an event from his own life (the resurrection) as a demonstration of what he is teaching. He acknowledges the evidence Bill sees, but then offers new explanations for it. He shows just how false and unappealing the victim stance is, by revealing that it's actually a *victimizer* stance in disguise. Jesus is absolutely intent on getting his message to go in.

What do we get when we combine these two characteristics—a radical message and devices that allow that message to go in? We have the possibility for that radical message to be truly internalized. We have, in short, the possibility of *maximum change*. That, I believe, is what we see demonstrated here in how Jesus performs the role of therapist.

Aside from wishing that Jesus could sit down next to us and be our therapist (or feeling relieved that he isn't!), what relevance does this have for us? Two things occur to me. First, we can let Jesus be our therapist every time we open the Course, for surely that is exactly what he is trying to do in those pages. Second, having let him be our therapist, we can learn how to be that kind of therapist for others. When asked for help, we can learn how to deliver a message that is far from that person's current thinking, but do so in such a loving, effective, and practical way that we do exactly what Jesus did: make way for maximal change.



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

**Robert Perry.** *He is the author or co-author of over twenty books and booklets, including Path of Light: Stepping into Peace with 'A Course in Miracles'.*

## CIRCLE MAILBOX

*The following are reader responses to Robert's article in A Better Way #122, "The Inexpressible Sanctity of Personhood."*

What a glorious gift to all Course students is your article "The Inexpressible Sanctity of Personhood," and especially your definition of "reality" as a "transcendental community of nonseparate persons in perfect relationship with each other."

I believe that my work with my Course teacher over the years has very much been application of this teaching, but it has never been articulated by him in this way or by anyone else that I have encountered. As you describe, it is a warm and fully intimate relationship with God and with our brothers that is the goal of the Course — and is achievable. This is very different from the nothingness that can sometimes be ascribed to our path and others.

— Peggy Noll

...

Thank you so much for your article "The Inexpressible Sanctity of Personhood." It answers a question I'd been pondering concerning the statement "There's nothing and no one out there, only projections" — though maybe I am interpreting it wrongly. To me all my brothers are very real, very much persons, and very much present for extending love. Only our perceived "sins" are projections.

— Rowan Hagen

• • •

I just finished my first reading of your article. It really is a tour de force — clear, concise, and poetic!

I had to stop reading your words at some points. The reality you articulate is so precious and perfect that I thought I would stop breathing or a vein would burst bloody with joy.

Your description of oneness, “limitless persons in perfect relationship,” captures the unique reality of the Course’s vision. People are longing to hear this. They are famished, waiting.

— Judy Robb