



Healing Is Reparation

The Relief of No Longer Having to Be Mistake Free

by Greg Mackie

Recently, during a meeting Patricia and I had with our couples counselor, our counselor gave me an insight that has had a positive impact on my life. The insight is not really new to me, but for whatever reason, it has hit me in a whole new way. It has helped me to see my life situation with a fresh perspective that has made me breathe a huge sigh of relief. Moreover, it is an insight that I think captures something essential about *A Course in Miracles*, so it is illuminating my spiritual path as well.

The short version of this insight is captured in the title of this article, which is actually based on a quote from the Course: *Healing is reparation*. In this article, I'd like to tell the story of how I received this insight, show how it is mirrored in the teachings of the Course, and provide some tips for how to apply it to your own life. I hope you will find yourself as relieved as I am.

How I received this insight

Telling the story of how I received this insight requires me to reveal a few quirks of my personality. I'm one of those people who seems, for better or worse, to be cut from a different cloth than most. Every personality test I take puts me in some sort of unusual outlier group that contains a very small percentage of the human population. This doesn't surprise me too much, because it is mirrored in my experience. Truth be told, I often feel like a visitor from another planet when I relate with people. (Rest assured, this is a metaphor — I'm not one of those people who claims to be an extraterrestrial!) I'm literally living in a foreign country right now, but even when I'm in the US, I feel like a bit of a stranger in a strange land, at times confused by the customs of these odd earthlings.

One result of this is that when I relate to people, at times I don't know exactly what they want or expect from me. I'm still learning the customs, and I don't have a guidebook. I do ask, of course, but often there are unspoken assumptions and cues that I'm expected to instinctively pick up. So, more often than I'd like, I make inadvertent mistakes that can confuse and upset and even hurt people who were expecting something different from me. (Of course, because I have an ego and therefore can get angry, I also at times upset people in ways that are not so inadvertent, but that is a different category.)

Because I tend to be a perfectionist as well, if I'm not quick with my Course practice I can all-too-easily condemn myself for these mistakes. I feel guilty. And to "atone" for that guilt and keep it from coming back, I try very hard to make up for my mistakes and carefully learn the proper thing to do so I can be mistake free in the future. Of course, this doesn't really work. Human beings and life on earth are too complex to be able to figure out a plan for every contingency. As soon as I think I've learned what to do in a particular situation and it seems to come up again, I find out that what I thought was familiar situation X is actually unfamiliar situation Y. So, I'm back to square one, not knowing what to do. More mistakes and more guilt can quickly follow. It can become a truly vicious cycle. I'm stuck in confusion and guilt, and it seems there's nothing I can do about it.

This is where our counselor came in. She has much experience with people who have this particular pattern of mine, so when I told her of my dilemma, she gave me a whole new way to approach it. She said that I need to give up the futile project of trying to be mistake free. Of course it is good for me to learn the customs of this strange planet as best I can so I can *reduce* the number of mistakes, but thinking I can *eliminate* them by my own efforts just isn't realistic. I'm in over my head here, and I'll just drive myself crazy trying to be perfect. Instead, she said, I should focus on *repairing* the damage from the inevitable mistakes I make — on healing whatever rifts those mistakes might bring about in my

relationships. This, she said, is something I really can learn how to do more effectively (even if I'm not perfect at it!), and my life and relationships will be much happier as a result.

As soon as she said this, I felt a huge weight lift off of my shoulders. Of course! Yeah, I make mistakes, lots of them, but they can be repaired. I'll try my best not to make them, but when I do inevitably make them, they can be undone if I bring my love and goodwill to the table and am willing to patch things up. What a relief! Everything will be okay. "A happy outcome to all things is sure" (W-pII.292.Heading). Thank you God!

The Course's version of this insight: "Healing is....reparation" (T-5.II.1:1)

When our counselor gave me this insight, I was immediately struck by how it dovetailed with the Course. And the more I've thought about it since, the more sense it makes to me. After all, the Course claims that this *whole world* is a mistake. From the Course's standpoint, the whole mess that is life on earth started when we made a mistake in Heaven: when we fell for the "tiny, mad desire to be separate, different and special" (T-25.I.5:5) and abandoned our true Self for the ego. This unfortunate mistake brought about a rift (at least in our minds) in our relationship with God and all our brothers, a rift which is mirrored in this insane world we made to cement specialness and separation firmly into place.

Now we are *all* strangers in a strange land: "You feel an alien here, from somewhere all unknown" (W-pI.182.1:4). We're all desperately trying to learn the customs of an odd planet where we don't really belong. In this odd place, we all struggle with trying to give people what they really want and need. Because our true nature is love, deep inside we really do want to love others and receive their love in return. We yearn for it. But because we find ourselves in Bizarro World instead of our home in Heaven, so often we have no idea how to love: "You cannot even give a blessing in perfect gentleness" (T-14.IV.8:6).

So, we make mistakes — *lots* of mistakes, including mistakes that confuse and upset and hurt others. Of course, from the Course's point of view, many of our mistakes that hurt people (far more than we realize) aren't really inadvertent at all: They stem from our decision to identify with the ego, whose very nature is attack. But since they stem from a *mis-taken* identity, they do stem from a kind of tragic ignorance on our part. As I said, deep down we really do want to give and receive love, but identifying with the ego causes us to look for love in all the wrong places. We've all unknowingly adopted the ego's motto, "Seek and do *not* find" (T-12.IV.1:4). So all too often, when we try to relate with others, we find ourselves saying with befuddlement, "I thought I was seeking love. How did I manage to hurt that person instead?"

When we hurt people, of course, we feel guilty, whether we're consciously aware of it or not. So, we try to "atone" for our mistakes in our own way, in order to relieve our guilt and keep from accumulating more. We try to live up to our "ego ideals" (T-13.II.2:4), our image of the perfect self that always says and does the proper thing. We try to relieve our guilt over our past mistakes by doing something good in the present, like Bill Thetford did when he tried to make up for his unloving acts toward a woman named Dora by later offering a cab to another woman (Urtext).

But of course, as long as we're doing all of this on our own initiative instead of asking for guidance, it doesn't work at all. In Bill's case, Jesus said, his offering the cab to the woman was actually an unloving act toward *Helen*, who was cold, late, and thus in great need of a cab herself. Bill's attempted "atonement" was thus an additional mistake (one that deep down his ego wanted him to make), and thus compounded his guilt still further. We're all still identified with our egos, and this world is far too complicated for us to figure out on our own. We have no clue what to do. We are truly in over our heads and doomed to failure if we think we can chart a safe path through the world's minefield alone. As with Bill, more mistakes and more guilt will quickly follow.

This is where the Course comes in, offering a different way to look at all this. We shouldn't try to be mistake free, at least not in our own way. True, we should make every attempt to *reduce* the mistakes as best we can, with the Holy Spirit's help. As I wrote in a recent piece on self-discipline, the Course strongly advocates mental vigilance to avoid making mistakes in the first place; in the words of Jesus to Helen and Bill about that mistake-filled day that included Bill's taxi misadventures, "This kind of human tragedy is far easier to avert than to undo" (Urtext). But that being said, no matter how good our mental vigilance is, we *will* make mistakes as long as we seem to be living in bodies on planet earth. As the Course says about the teachers of God (who are more advanced than most), "They are not perfect, or they would not be here" (M-In.5:5). Trying to be mistake free just isn't a realistic goal for us.

Thank goodness, then, that the Course offers us a fresh new perspective: Its emphasis is on *repairing* the mistakes we make, and thus healing the rifts these mistakes seem to engender in our relationships with each other and with God. Again, from the Course's perspective, life on earth is itself rooted in a mistake we keep perpetuating in myriad ways: the mistake of separation stemming from the desire to be special. Yes, all of this is an illusion, so no real damage has been done, thank God. But in our minds we mistakenly think all of this has really happened, so the Course as a whole is very much about repairing the *apparent* damage we've done.

For instance, we are told, in the line on which the title of this article is based, that "Healing is not creating; it is repa-

ration” (T-5.II.1:1). We are told that miracles, the means of healing, “are reparative” (T-9.VI.6:1). We are told that Christ’s vision, the source of miracles, enables the world to be “repaired, made new again, but in a different light” (W-pI.159.7:1). And the Course is soaked throughout with other forms of “repair” language, such as “restoring,” “correcting” and “undoing.”

But probably the most important “repair” word in the Course is *Atonement*, and this word is especially pertinent to our current topic because the concept of atonement is all about repairing *relationships*. In fact, my dictionary defines the word “atonement” as “reparation for a wrong or injury” — in other words, you’ve done something that has brought about a rift in your relationship with someone, but by making some sort of atonement for the thing you did, you repair the relationship and the two of you are “at one” again. In religious contexts, the relationship is usually our relationship with God, and “atonement” refers to whatever is done to restore *that* relationship to an “at one” state once again.

And this, in essence, is what “Atonement” is in the Course: the term refers to the means of reparation that heals the apparent rift in our relationship with God and with our brothers, the rift we brought about when we mistakenly chose separation. Of course, in typical fashion, the Course offers us a radically unconventional version of reparation. Traditionally, the rift with others and with God is regarded as real, and reparation is made through some sort of sacrifice to the “wronged” party, be it an apology, a cash settlement, a jail term, an animal sacrifice, or Jesus’ death on the cross for our sins.

But the Course’s view of the Atonement is rooted in the crucial idea that *the rift is not real*, that “*the separation never occurred*” (T-6.II.10:7). The reparation is a reparation of a mistaken idea in our minds, the very idea that we could actually *do* real damage to God and His invulnerable creations. Undoing this idea is what ultimately heals the apparent rift in all of our relationships. So, while we *are* called to actively do things to repair the apparent damage our mistakes have done to our relationships (as we’ll see below), we are to do these things in a way that communicates the liberating truth that in the ultimate sense, no damage was really done.

How I’m trying to apply the insight that healing is reparation

A Course in Miracles gives us many ways to accept the Atonement for ourselves and extend it to others. Here, I want to focus on what I’m specifically doing to undo my problem of trying and failing to be mistake free. There are three basic things that I’m doing. I don’t think they necessarily have to be done in the order I’m listing them here; I think they all blend together to some degree. But what follows is the basic approach I’ve been using when I’ve made one of my inevitable mistakes. I hope that some of what I offer here will be helpful to you in your own life.

Forgive myself for making the mistake

When I make one of my inadvertent (or maybe deep down not so inadvertent) mistakes with another person — when something I’ve done has upset or hurt him or her — the first thing that usually happens is that my perfectionism kicks in. I’ll say to myself, “You idiot, you blew it again!” So here, I find that what I need to do right away is turn away from that knee-jerk reaction of self-condemnation. I’ll say to myself some version of this: “Greg, making mistakes is inevitable. It is just a part of being human. You are in a process of learning. It doesn’t make you a horrible person or an incompetent person. And this mistake, like all mistakes, caused no *real* damage. Plus, the *apparent* damage can be repaired, so in the end everything will be okay.”

Practices from the Course are a big help in getting this to sink in. I remind myself that I remain as God created me, that what I did was a mistake but not a sin and did no real damage, that my sinlessness is guaranteed by God and light and joy and peace abide in me (Lesson 93), that I am God’s beloved Son in whom He is well pleased (T-4.I.8:6), or other words to that effect. One line I’ve always loved that speaks to the idea that my mistakes can be undone — a line that helps undo the guilt that comes from my mistake — is this one from the famous chapter 5 practice in the Text: “I do not feel guilty, because the Holy Spirit will undo all the consequences of my wrong decision if I will let Him” (T-5.VII.6:10). Relax — the damage can be repaired!

One further comment about this step: Those familiar with the Circle’s work know that we emphasize the idea that the Course’s primary mode of healing is forgiving *others* rather than ourselves directly. I think this is true, yet of course it doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t ever do direct self-forgiveness. We see direct self-forgiveness in many places in the Course, and it is implicit in all those places where we affirm our holiness and innocence, etc. The Course’s big point about self-forgiveness is that it won’t really “stick” — we won’t be thoroughly convinced of our innocence — unless we *also* extend love and forgiveness to others. This extension is not only an act of kindness to others, but is also the final proof of our own innocence, which leads to my next two steps.

Repair the apparent damage resulting from my mistake, as guided

Now that I've taken the edge off of my self-condemnation and reassured myself that the damage *can* be repaired, I'm in a much better position to ask for guidance about how I might repair the apparent damage my mistake has caused. So, I try to do just that: I ask God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit, "What would you have me do to repair the damage here? What would you have me do to heal the apparent rift in this relationship?" One form of asking I really like is in this passage from *The Song of Prayer*:

"What should I do for him, Your holy Son?" should be the only thing you ever ask when help is needed and forgiveness sought. The form the seeking takes you need not judge. And let it not be you who sets the form in which forgiveness comes to save God's Son. (S-2.III.5:1-3)

I love this passage because it reminds me that when asking for guidance, I should neither judge the form in which the other person is seeking help (which in response to my mistake may well be anger or pain) *nor* decide what form my repair should take. Being guided is absolutely critical; I need to atone in *His* way, not mine. So, I try to listen to guidance as well as I'm able and do what that guidance directs. What I'm guided to do is different with each situation, of course, but I find that most of the time it is simple acts of human kindness: an apology, loving words, or actions that either undo the immediate mistake or make up for it by being kind in another situation later on.

That last sentence might need some explanation, because wasn't Jesus critical of Bill for offering a woman a taxi as a way of "atoning" for his earlier lack of love toward Dora? Yes, but the problem there was that Bill did that on his *own* initiative, without asking for guidance. As a result, it not only wasn't truly healing, but as I mentioned, Jesus said it was an additional unloving act toward Helen, who needed a taxi herself. Rather than repairing the damage from the error, then, it was "well calculated to lead to further error" (Urtext).

But actually, in other personal guidance to Helen and Bill, Jesus makes it clear that he is very much in favor of *guided* acts of atoning for previous mistakes. For instance, Helen visiting her mother-in-law was a guided way of atoning for her earlier lack of love toward her husband. Her rewriting of the Shield report to secure funding to help retarded children was a guided way of atoning for hurting children in the past (in a past life). And we even have the story of Helen's maid, Rosie, who Jesus said was serving Helen and her husband now because she had hurt them earlier (also in a past life). This last example may sound like some sort of sacrifice or punishment for past misdeeds, but Jesus stressed that Rosie actually saw it as a way of joyously undoing her past errors: "She is blessed in that she sees service as a source of joy" (Urtext).

This, then, is what I try my best to do: to repair the damage my mistake has done in whatever way I feel guided. (This seeking of guidance is not limited to a solitary going within; it can also take the form of asking the other person what he or she needs, or asking someone like our counselor for help.) My reception of guidance is imperfect, of course, so I might make a further mistake! But that one, too, can be undone if I keep trying my best to hear guidance and act on it.

Forgive others for the mistakes they have made

This, of course, is the Course's golden road to salvation. As I mentioned in the first step, forgiving others is the Course's primary mode of healing, the act that ultimately convinces us that *we* are forgiven. And it feels especially crucial to me because, however many mistakes I may make myself, they don't occur in a vacuum. If my mistake occurs in the context of one of my close relationships, it occurs in a relationship with a *history*, in which both of us have been trading mistakes back and forth for a long time. If they aren't undone through forgiveness, the apparent damage can accumulate over time, and the relationship can suffer as a result. Relationships need forgiveness like bodies need baths and showers: We have to continually remove the accumulated dirt and stink of unforgiveness so we can start each new day clean and fresh.

So, as a committed student of *A Course in Miracles*, I really do try my best to forgive the mistakes others make, using the vast repertoire of forgiveness practices the Course offers us to help us see and extend the good news that others too did no real damage with *their* mistakes. How can I really forgive myself if I do not forgive others? I'm reminded of a Course passage that was originally about Helen and Bill's holy relationship. They too made mistakes and hurt each other, but Jesus implored them to be grateful for each other's positive contributions and forgive each other's mistakes:

You undertook, together to invite the Holy Spirit into your relationship. He could not have entered otherwise. And, though you have made many mistakes since then, you have also made enormous efforts to help Him

do His work. And He has *not* been lacking in appreciation for all you have done for Him, nor does He see the mistakes at all.

Have you been similarly grateful to each other? Have you consistently appreciated the *good* efforts, and *overlooked* mistakes? Or has your appreciation flickered and grown dim, in what *seemed* to be the *light* of the mistakes? (Urtext version of T-17.V.11:1-8)

This is a crucial question to ask myself: Have I been grateful to others for their good efforts and overlooked their mistakes? Only by doing this will I truly be able to appreciate my own good efforts and overlook my own mistakes. Only when I forgive others for not being mistake free will I really be able to forgive myself for not being mistake free.

“No future without forgiveness”

As I said at the beginning of this article, this insight that I can focus on repairing my mistakes rather than trying to be mistake free has been a blessed relief. It takes a lot of the pressure off of me. Rather than striving futilely for the unrealistic goal of mistake-free living, I’m focusing on doing my best (with the Course’s help and the help of people like our counselor) to both reduce the number of mistakes I make and undo the ones I inevitably do make. This is a goal I really can attain, so I go forward with a much greater sense of hope and happiness.

And as I’ve thought about this more and more, it has struck me that really, my dilemma is everyone’s dilemma. It is a dilemma the entire world is dealing with, in situations from personal relationships to international relations. We all make countless mistakes with each other, no matter how much we try to do things right. It’s just part of the human condition. However perfect our true Self is as God created us (and I believe this is true), as long as we believe we are on earth, we are fallible and all too prone to make mistakes engendered by our identification with our egos. So, if our world is to function and we are to find healing, we absolutely *must* be able to *repair* the inevitable mistakes we make on a daily basis. Life just can’t go on without this.

That is why Desmond Tutu, who created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to undo the damage caused by the tragic mistake of apartheid in South Africa, said that there is “no future without forgiveness.” What was needed on a large scale in South Africa is needed in the “small” scale of our lives every day. We all need reparation. We all need healing. Thank God we have paths like the Course to help us do that!



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

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CIRCLE MAILBOX

We received the following feedback about Robert’s article “Jesus as Therapist: The Discourse about Bill’s Parents,” in A Better Way #123.

Thank you for your article. I could have used this a year ago. It would have saved me a lot of self-inflicted grief! However, a year ago, I probably would have skimmed over it and not appreciated it for all its value.

— Rev. Judy Junghans

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Thanks for writing this truly helpful article. I especially love the visual you create with the bit about our parents holding a toy gun and we say “Bang!”, squirt ketchup all over ourselves and shout “Look what you’ve done!” What a great illustration and I will use it to internalize this radically healing message.

— Marianne Sears