



The Ultimate Problem-Solving Repertoire

How *A Course in Miracles* Has Helped Us in Couples Counseling— and How It Could Become a Helper of the World

by Greg Mackie

In the last issue of *A Better Way*, I shared an insight I had received from the couples counselor my partner Patricia and I are working with (“[Healing Is Reparation](#),” *A Better Way* #124). In this issue, I’d like to share an even more profound insight Patricia and I have had as we’ve continued this work: *A Course in Miracles* is truly the *ultimate* “problem-solving repertoire” (W-p1.194.6:2). Its positive impact on my and Patricia’s relationship and on our experience with counseling has been—well, miraculous. Moreover, that positive impact has spread to our counselor, who is applying Course insights from our sessions to her work with her other clients—clients who may now potentially benefit from the Course without ever hearing of it.

For me, the question arises: Where does this impact end? Couldn’t it keep expanding beyond those clients as they extend their Course-based benefits to others, until “a strong chain of Atonement is welded” (T-1.III.9:2)? There are so many suffering people out there who want relief but feel like they are lacking the tools they need to lift themselves out of hell. If the Course’s tools have helped us so much and have also extended outward to help our counselor and her clients, couldn’t they extend even further? In this article, I want to show specifically how the Course has helped Patricia and me in our experience of couples counseling, how it has helped our counselor and her other clients, and how it could take its place as, in the words of Jesus to Helen and Bill in personal guidance, “a helper of the world.”

How the Course has helped us in couples counseling

I want to begin by sharing how Patricia and I found our counselor, because that felt like a miracle in itself. We sought a counselor because, though our relationship is very loving and we feel we have truly joined in a common purpose, like most couples we have our challenges too. It isn’t always easy to communicate, especially since we’re from different countries (Mexico and the US) and speak different native languages. The very depth of our connection to each other and commitment to our shared vision forces us to face our egos on a regular basis. The light has a funny way of scaring up the darkness.

So we sought a counselor, but it seemed unlikely we would find what we needed. Since Patricia’s English is much better than my Spanish, we needed an English-speaking counselor, which is hard to find where we live in Mexico. So, we had to find one who was willing to work with us on the telephone or Skype without ever meeting us in person, which we thought no one would do. So, taking a shot in the dark, I described our situation on an Internet discussion group I sometimes visit, and asked if anyone knew of a counselor who might work with us. It is a fairly active group, but to my surprise, I got only a single reply saying that we should check out this woman in Seattle, with a link to her website. It was the only lead we had, so I contacted her and told her our story.

Well, I think the Holy Spirit was working overtime, because it turned out that this particular counselor was absolutely *perfect* for us. First off, she’s simply a super nice person whom we like very much. All of us hit it off immediately. Plus, she’s happy to work with us online. On top of that, she has a great deal of expertise and experience with unconventional couples like us. Best of all, though she is not herself a student of *A Course in Miracles*, she is familiar with it and is highly supportive of our work with it. We bring up the Course and our spiritual experiences in sessions all the time, and what we share dovetails so nicely with the insights, tips, strategies, and perspectives she is giving us.

Our work together has been truly remarkable. Patricia and I have made a lot of progress, with our counselor’s expert

help. And as the three of us have worked together, our counselor has shared something very surprising to us: She says that while many of the couples she works with have a tendency to remain stuck in the same destructive patterns for a long time, in her opinion Patricia and I have shown an uncommon ability to break the hold of our destructive patterns more rapidly than most. I don't think she's just buttering us up to make us feel good; we can tell just from her tone of voice that she really marvels at this. She even asks us if she can share some of our ideas and strategies with her other clients.

Why do we seem to progress faster? All three of us have pondered this. Of course, Patricia and I would like to think that at least some of this is due to our own personal qualities, and perhaps some of it is. But we are very ordinary people, "stumbling up to God" as our dear friend John Perry used to say, and no doubt those other clients have many good personal qualities too. We're probably no better or worse than the others. What, then, is the difference?

All three of us suspect that a crucial factor in our quicker progress is our walking the path of *A Course in Miracles*, which after all bills itself as a time-saving device. It's not that we're so great, then, but that the *Course* is so great. Now, presumably some of our counselor's other clients have spiritual paths as well, which surely must be helpful to them. (Maybe some of them are even *Course* students, though she hasn't said so.) But while of course she isn't giving us any details about other clients, the impression we get is that few of them have a path as profound, systematic, and practical as the *Course*. The *Course* is a priceless treasure trove of practical tools that many other couples—many of our counselor's other clients, at any rate—simply do not currently have at their disposal. Our *Course* problem-solving repertoire seems to be the secret of our success.

Specific areas where the Course has helped us

How, then, has our work with the *Course* helped Patricia and me move more quickly through the challenges of our relationship? Here are some specific benefits we have experienced through walking the *Course*'s path, specific areas in which the *Course*'s theory and practice have been especially helpful as we work with our counselor:

Love

Above all, the *Course* has helped us realize that *love* is the most important thing of all in this world—love that is gratefully accepted into the mind, deeply felt in the heart, and joyously expressed in acts of kindness to each other and to everyone we encounter. Whatever challenges life throws our way, whatever temptations to anger and fear may arise, whatever mistakes we may make, whatever thorny questions present themselves, *love is the answer*. Our counselor certainly agrees: Couples who genuinely love each other and see love and active kindness as the foundation of their lives together can work through pretty much anything that comes their way. Without that foundation, their chances of success are not good, to say the least.

Of course, a major form love takes in the *Course* is *forgiveness*, and this too has become a foundation stone for our relationship. My previous article about healing as reparation was all about forgiveness: Our counselor gave me the insight that rather than focusing on trying to do everything perfectly, I should focus on repairing whatever damage my inevitably imperfect behavior has done. This idea immediately brought to my mind the *Course*'s idea that forgiveness, a kind of reparation, is the way to undo all of our errors and return to love.

Forgiveness has come up often in our counseling sessions. I remember one time in particular when Patricia was sharing the profound effect the following line from the *Course* had on her: "All things must first be forgiven, and *then* understood" (T-30.V.1:6). For Patricia, this was the perfect antidote for her tendency to want to fully understand the reasons for other people's actions as a prerequisite for forgiving them. Our counselor absolutely loved this, and said with a laugh, "Can I steal that?" Well, since it's from the *Course*, we told her she was fully entitled to it. It's just another helpful nugget from "a course on love" (T-13.IV.1:2).

Truth

The *Course* has helped us strengthen our commitment to *truth*, instead of doggedly hanging on to our egos' lies. Actually, I think this is one area where my and Patricia's particular talents have been useful. Whatever faults we have, both of us have a low tolerance for lies and self-deception. Make no mistake, I'm not saying we'll be nominated for sainthood any time soon; we each have our stubborn streaks and blind spots, and on our bad days we can hang on pretty strongly to our distorted ways of seeing things. But soon enough we just get tired of the nonsense and yearn for the peace that comes from facing without blinders the darkness of our egos. Eventually we admit our mistakes so we can gratefully let them go and get back to love.

Whatever personal strengths we may have in this area, though, there is no doubt in my mind that what feeds those

strengths is the Course. It constantly reminds us that healing comes when we want truth above all else, “*because it is the truth*” (T-22.In.3:6). The Course is so relentless in reminding us that self-deception will only keep us in hell, and only the truth will set us free. It keeps us honest; when we do fall into those stubborn moments, the Course keeps pulling us out.

Our counselor has really noticed this. So much of her work involves trying to help people see things differently so they can break out of the ruts they’ve dug for themselves, but human beings have an amazing ability to grimly hold on to old and familiar ways of being, no matter how much pain that brings them. She says that in her experience, our commitment to truth is unusual. And I think that in large part, we have the Course to thank for that.

Mind training

I think the mind-training aspect of the Course is what makes everything else work. It’s fine to talk about love, forgiveness, truth, and so on, but without a systematic program in *mind training*, those are little more than empty words, a form of what I’ve heard called “platitudinal healing.” As the Workbook so pointedly tells us, “An untrained mind can accomplish nothing” (W-p1.In.1:3). The Course has given Patricia and me a spiritual path to walk and a practical method of training our minds “to think along the lines the text [of the Course] sets forth” (W-In.1:4). We have not just pretty words but a full-fledged problem-solving repertoire, one we often practice together.

This fits so well with the work we are doing with our counselor. She has her own unique way of doing things, but one therapeutic model she draws from is a type of therapy called Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). The [website](#) of the National Association of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapists describes CBT this way:

Cognitive-behavioral therapy is based on the idea that our *thoughts* cause our feelings and behaviors, not external things, like people, situations, and events. The benefit of this fact is that we can change the way we think to feel/act better even if the situation does not change.

Sound familiar? This description could just as well be a description of the Course, for the essence of CBT is helping the client to change his or her thoughts and beliefs and thus have a completely different and happier experience of the world. Indeed, at one point I jokingly said to our counselor that Patricia and I were already following the best CBT program out there. She laughingly (but earnestly) agreed that our program of mind training through the Course is a huge help to us.

Another helpful aspect of the Course’s mind training for us is meditation. Both Patricia and I have some issues with anxiety and physical/emotional sensitivity, and our counselor has told us that many of her clients have similar problems. Many of them struggle with anxiety to such a strong degree that they take various medications, which are often very helpful for them. Patricia and I do not, and we like to think at least one reason for this is our regular practice of Course-based meditation and other calming practices. Our counselor thinks it is a genuine possibility that the mind training the Course is giving us is helping to free us from the need for such medication. (Perhaps there is a motto here: “Don’t medicate—meditate!”)

Guidance

The Course has helped us realize just how much we truly don’t know, and therefore how much we absolutely need the *guidance* of Someone Who does know. It has helped us to develop an active prayer life, a commitment to asking for guidance in all aspects of our lives. Our counselor is not a spiritual counselor and isn’t really giving us instruction in this area, but as I mentioned earlier, she’s very open to the Course and things spiritual. She’s even noted that our relationship has a “soul mate” component to it, a sense that Someone larger than ourselves has guided us to be together. She appreciates that this is a real source of strength for us.

Moreover, the recognition that there’s so much we don’t know certainly contributes to our commitment to truth. Those who know how little they know are much more likely to question the things they think they *do* know. Our questioning, combined with the conviction that God can give us a real answer, is something that I’m sure must help us progress more quickly out of the “same old, same old” patterns that all too often can keep people in chains.

Mission

I called love the “foundation” of our relationship above, and certainly that is true. Yet I think the fuel for our relationship, the thing that keeps it going even when life challenges us, is our sense of *mission*. In Course terms, I’m speaking of our relationship as a holy relationship: one the Holy Spirit has brought together because we share a common purpose, a joint special function, a divine mission of extending miracles to others.

Our relationship has been about that mission from the very beginning. We met at the first Circle Course Community gathering in April of 2011, and I’ll never forget the moment Patricia rushed up to me during a break in a workshop Robert was giving. She said she felt strongly that we had work to do together, and I immediately found myself agreeing. I was liter-

ally trembling afterward; it felt like something hugely significant had just happened. I remember thinking, “That felt like a Helen and Bill moment.”

Indeed it was. Later on (during our first date), we agreed that for a relationship to really work, it has to be about a higher purpose, a mission that is greater than simply the two people. A common and holy purpose is the key to everything. For us, the details of that mission are still coming together day by day, but the essence of it is that we are meant to bring a Course perspective to the work Patricia is doing to help migrants and those impacted by migration—to bring to this work a perspective that says everyone matters, everyone matters equally, and everyone matters infinitely. This mission drives everything we do.

The great news is that from the start, our counselor has affirmed and supported this sense of mission. I’ve already mentioned that she has noted the “soul mate” component of our relationship, the conviction that it is about so much more than just us. She’s also noted that the very emotional sensitivity I mentioned above, though it can be daunting to deal with sometimes, seems to be a kind of impetus that gives us motivation for our mission. It gives us a sensitivity to the plight of other people that feeds our desire to help them. And she agrees that the sense of mission we have is a key to the success of our relationship—a sense she sees lacking in many of the couples she works with. I’m confident that she would agree with the Course that for our relationship or any relationship to come to full fruition, “The holy light that brought you together *must* extend [to others], as *you* accepted it” (T-18.I.13:6, Urtext version).

How the Course has helped our counselor and her other clients

That extension of the light has happened in many ways, and to our pleasant surprise one form it has taken is extension to our counselor herself. All three of us agree that just as she is helping us, *we* are helping *her*—we really have the sense that we are a team, working together for the benefit of all three of us, as well as of all the different people it is our mission to serve.

How do we help her? Probably the main way is simply by sharing with her what we’ve learned from the Course. Whenever we do, she lights up and tells us how useful it is to her. I’ve already mentioned her “Can I steal that?” comment when Patricia shared the idea of first forgiving, *then* understanding. She was also struck by the fact that her advice to me about healing as reparation is so closely echoed in the Course. She is clearly impressed with the Course’s version of CBT, and also with the tools and coping skills the Course is giving us, like meditation. And it seems that our sense of mission is rubbing off on her a bit too, inspiring her to move closer to completing a book project that seems like it might be part of her own mission.

I get the sense too that our success is helping to inspire her and give her hope, just as she is doing for us. Now, I’m reading between the lines here a bit, because of course she’s not spilling her guts out to us—she is our counselor; we are not hers. But as I’ve mentioned, she does note (always in a compassionate, kindly way) that many of her clients have difficulty getting out of their painful ruts, and I can imagine that this must at times be distressing for her. One time she had to cancel an appointment with us because another client committed suicide, and I can’t even begin to imagine how *that* must have felt. Both Patricia and I suspect that our willingness to really put into practice what she’s sharing with us, and the success we’re having as a result, is helping to inspire her. After all, what therapist isn’t gratified by client success stories?

Finally, as I’ve also mentioned, this extension is going even further in the form of our counselor sharing our ideas, insights, and strategies with other clients (I’m guessing without mentioning the Course by name most of the time). All of us joke that perhaps sometimes *she* should pay *us*. So, it seems that they may benefit from the Course by proxy as well. Though of course it isn’t our job to check on the progress of her other clients, I hope that at some point our counselor might be able to tell us if the things she’s shared are working for them. It would be heartening to see if this further extension is bearing fruit; we trust that it is.

How the Course could become a helper of the world

My and Patricia’s experience with our counselor has led me to reflect on just how helpful the Course could potentially be to people all over the world. Because let’s face it, those other clients are not alone; indeed, they are us. Virtually *everyone* in this insane world is suffering in one way or another, struggling mightily to undo painful patterns and situations that seem impossible to undo, feeling shrouded in darkness and groping for the light, yearning to escape the ego’s prison but seemingly lacking the tools needed to do so. People desperately need relief, wherever it can be found. How can we help relieve this suffering?

At the Circle, we believe one way to relieve this suffering is to share the tools the Course offers to help people lift themselves out of hell. But how can we best share these tools? We believe that perhaps the most potent way is one that

draws from the Course's own vision for how salvation is accomplished: "the plan of the teachers" (M-1.2:10), a plan rooted in teacher-pupil relationships in which Course teachers act as one-to-one personal mentors sharing the path of the Course with their pupils, who will in turn become Course teachers teaching their own pupils, and so on. We've been wanting to get something like this started for years, and so we decided to create a training program for teachers of pupils. It was with great joy that we graduated our first class of teachers this October in Sedona.

These teachers and others who follow will teach the Course in a formal and direct way to their pupils: teaching its thought system, guiding pupils through its program, acting as belief doctors (doing a kind of Course-based CBT), practicing forgiveness, serving as examples of the Course's way, and joining with their pupils in holy relationships. But in addition to this teacher-pupil track, clearly there will also be a kind of parallel track in which these teachers will teach the Course in other ways. Some will teach it in the form of classes, writing, etc. And inevitably these teachers will also teach the Course's way in less formal and direct forms as it permeates their daily lives: sharing its ideas and tools for transformation with friends, colleagues, and family without necessarily referring to it directly, serving as living examples of people whose lives have changed for the better, etc.

Finally, people whom these Course teachers teach in whatever manner will inevitably "pay it forward" by extending what they've learned to others, even if they aren't aware of the Course by name. Its powerful toolbox can become available to people who walk other paths, to those "from all religions and from no religion" (M-1.2:2), to all who are suffering and looking for a way out. In this way, we believe, the Course's remedy for the human condition can ultimately benefit a huge number of people, whether they know about the Course or not.

We're very inspired by how well the Circle's teacher training went. It gave us great hope that a tradition rooted in teacher-pupil relationships could really work. In the program, teacher trainees who have been helped so much by the Course have extended it to their pupils, who in turn have extended it to others in various ways. The results have been truly miraculous. We deeply believe that this is *the* way to ensure that the Course can truly reach "from the paper on which it was written into the hearts for which it was intended" (personal guidance to Helen and Bill).

This brings me to my and Patricia's experience in couples counseling. When our counselor told us that some of her other clients don't have the tools we do, we found ourselves thanking God for the Course that gives us those tools. Indeed, we both are convinced that we simply couldn't do what we feel called to do without the Course. How do people manage to live without it? How did *we* live without it for so many years before we discovered it? Don't get me wrong; I'm not suggesting that somehow every single person needs the Course like we do. For others, a different path provides the way out of the darkness of the world. But for us, the Course is the air we breathe.

And this is one reason (besides the simple fact that our relationship has benefited so much from our counselor's care) that I'm inspired by our couples counseling experience, just as I'm inspired by the success of our teacher training program. To me they are linked, for it seems to me that our counseling experience is a beautiful snapshot of that "parallel track" I mentioned. Obviously, we aren't formal Course teachers for our counselor; on the contrary, our formal relationship is a therapist-patient relationship in which *she* teaches *us*. (Interestingly, from the standpoint of the Psychotherapy supplement, the therapist-patient relationship is so similar to the teacher-pupil relationship that "at the highest levels they become one" [P-2. II.2:5].) But as she's worked with us, we who have been helped so much by the Course are informally sharing the Course with her to her benefit, and she in turn is passing its tool chest to her own clients, even if she never mentions the Course to them.

Patricia and I are immensely grateful for all the blessings our experience with couples counseling has brought us. It has helped us undo difficult patterns, communicate more effectively, draw closer together, deepen our love, and devote ourselves more fully than ever to our shared mission. Much of the credit for this must go to our counselor, a wonderful person who seemed to drop into our lives as if divinely appointed. She has been a true miracle worker for us.

But all of us agree that much of the credit must also go to the practical power of *A Course in Miracles*. As I said at the beginning, Patricia and I are convinced that the Course is the *ultimate* problem-solving repertoire, and seeing its benefits through the eyes of our counselor only strengthens our conviction that we have in our hands a pearl of great price. The Course has helped us so much, and I'm convinced that with the right kind of nurturing and enough time, it can reach out and help *so* many other people who are trying to climb out of the abyss but are lacking the equipment they need. How much suffering could we relieve if we could all be the people who give this infant tradition the nurturing it needs, so that it can, as Jesus once told Helen and Bill, "grow from infancy into a helper of the world"?



E-mail your comments to the author at: 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.