



Purpose, Vision, Guidance

The Foundation for a Fulfilling Life

by Greg Mackie

I don't know about you, but I find the world a complicated and uncertain place, at times even overwhelming. It just seems like too much to deal with. Because of this, the burning question for me every day is this: In the midst of all this seeming chaos, how can I live the life God really wants me to live? How can I fulfill the function He has given me in His plan for salvation, so that when my time on earth is done, I will have the joy of knowing that I did what I was meant to do, that I really did make a difference, that my life really did make this world a better place, that what I did brought us at least a few steps closer to awakening in Heaven?

To help bring some order to the apparent chaos, I have always found it helpful to ground my life in a few basic first principles, principles that can put my life on a firm foundation and guide everything I do. Of course, since I am a student and teacher of *A Course in Miracles*, nowadays these first principles are firmly rooted in the Course and its path. But what are they?

As I thought about this question, I realized that the basic framework of my life is built around the three things that make up the title of this article: *purpose*, *vision*, and *guidance*. When I think about my life, when I'm wrestling with a problem, when I teach the Course, when I help people with their issues, it seems that some version of these three things crops up again and again. Whatever the specifics, it seems that living a happy life centered in God always involves discerning God's purpose and keeping it in mind, asking for His help to truly see things with His loving vision, and asking for His guidance about how to express that loving vision to others in the most helpful way. Whatever else may be involved, these things seem essential.

Of course, you may frame your own life differently. Different words may appeal to you, and the Course itself has many ways of framing what life is meant to be all about. Moreover, this is a foundation that I would never want to become an oversimplification; as a student of the Course, I would never want it to replace the sophisticated, multifaceted, and profound masterpiece that is the Course's path. There is much in the Course that is not covered by these very basic principles, and it is important to use it all.

That being said, here I want to expand on this foundation that I have found helpful. Along the way, I'll offer a few illustrations from my partner Patricia's work, since my conversations with her about that work have helped illuminate the elements of this foundation for me. My hope is that this article might help you to more firmly ground your life, so that you can experience the fulfillment of successfully accomplishing what God would have *you* do.

Purpose: "What is it *for*?"

This is really where it all begins. What is my life *for*? What's the point of it all? What am I doing here? What is my mission? What is God's purpose for my being here? The longer I have lived, the more I have come to realize that the answer to these questions needs to be at the heart of everything I think, say, or do. I have come to believe deeply that to the degree I can get clear on my God-given purpose and devote myself to fulfilling that purpose, my life will be meaningful, worthwhile, and happy, regardless of whatever might happen in the course of it.

The Course places a huge emphasis on purpose, inviting us to constantly ask of everything we encounter in our lives, "What is it *for*?" (T-17.VI.2:2). And what *is* life for? What, to use that old chestnut from philosophy, is the meaning of life? In the Course's view, life is about doing our part in God's plan for salvation, our part in His plan for awakening to the Heaven we never really left. And what is that part? Whatever form it takes, each of us is meant to love others, to forgive others, to be a miracle worker who saves the world through extending a loving perception of others to them in

thought, word, and deed. This is how we learn to love ourselves and remember who we are. Our particular form of doing our part in God's plan is what the Course calls our special function.

The special function is what brings *meaning* to our lives, and I've come to believe that human beings yearn for meaning above all else. As Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl said in *Man's Search for Meaning*, "Those who have a 'why' to live, can bear with almost any 'how'"—in other words, a person with purpose and meaning in his or her life can endure virtually anything, no matter how difficult, if it serves to fulfill that purpose. This yearning for meaning is so strong that I think it is even more fundamental than the desire for physical sustenance. After all, people eat and drink because they want to live, but they want to live because their lives *mean* something to them. Conversely, people commit suicide—giving up food and drink and everything else—precisely because their lives *no longer* mean anything to them. Meaning is primary; physical survival is secondary.

Therefore, I believe that both finding our special function and doing everything we can to fulfill it is really the key to everything. Many people in this world, of course, don't believe in any kind of higher purpose at all, and I think the cost of this to them is unfortunately very great—they go through the motions of life and pursue trivial goals, while feeling a great emptiness inside. The Course itself speaks in poignant terms of the despair of not discovering our special function, and of the sense of meaning and fulfillment that comes when we finally do:

The lonely ones are those who see no function in the world for them to fill; no place where they are needed, and no aim which only they can perfectly fulfill.

...To each [the Holy Spirit] gives a special function in salvation he alone can fill; a part for only him. Nor is the plan complete until he finds his special function, and fulfills the part assigned to him, to make himself complete within a world where incompleteness rules. (T.25.VI.3:6, 4:2-3)

In light of this, when people ask me questions about how to solve a particular problem, I find myself more and more asking them to what degree they are in touch with their special function—what their life is all about. To the degree that they are in touch with that, I think they can be fulfilled whatever problem confronts them.

Even those who believe that such a function really exists often struggle to find their own special function. Finding this function is a process that unfolds over time, a process that continues our entire lives. It's a process we need to open ourselves to through guidance seeking and careful examination of our lives to see if we can discern the meaning and purpose God has for them. And once we find that function, the key to fulfilling it is to keep it in mind and not lose sight of it.

Losing sight of it is so easy, as Patricia and I have seen in her work. She works with groups (especially Catholic groups) devoted to promoting the human rights of migrants and providing humanitarian aid to them. This is the purpose they have joined in, and they are wonderful people who are very dedicated to this work. Yet like all of us, they are prone to forgetting what brought them together. They can get distracted by infighting, pointless arguments, and competition with other organizations. At times Patricia, good Course student that she is, has said to them, "Let's remember our *purpose*. Let's remember the holy reason we are working together." This has been very helpful at times; people have gratefully said "Oh, yeah, you're right," and refocused themselves on the purpose for which they joined.

Of course, losing sight of our purpose is a problem for all of us. Therefore, doing my best to always keep my purpose in mind has become a very important practice for me. I want to do my part in God's plan for salvation. I want to be a miracle worker extending love in thought, word, and deed. More specifically, my special function as I understand it has to do with teaching the Course and also helping Patricia in her work with migrants. I use many Course practices to keep this purpose in mind, but above all I try to ask of everything in my life, "What is it *for*?"

Vision: "Above all else I want to see things differently"

This stems directly from devotion to my purpose, because if our part in salvation from the Course's standpoint is to extend a loving perception of others to them, of course it must start with *having* a loving perception of them. According to the Course, this is accomplished by learning how to see everyone and everything through the vision of Christ, a nonphysical vision which sees beyond the physical to the holiness and innocence that is the reality behind everyone and everything. The Course claims that this vision is the golden road to salvation, so I try to keep in mind the words of Lesson 28 of the Workbook: "Above all else I want to see things differently" (W-pI.28.Heading).

Over time, I've come to see the crucial role of this. What I've seen again and again as I've looked at both my experience and that of others is a tendency to put the cart before the horse: We're so focused on what to *do* that we forget that before we can really know what to do, we have to *see* the situation correctly. The Course speaks of this in its comments on the Golden Rule, Jesus' famous biblical injunction that you must do unto others as you would have them do unto

you. He fully affirms this rule in the Course, calling it “the rule for appropriate behavior” (T-1.III.6:4), but he adds a crucial caveat: To really behave in accordance with the Golden Rule, your “perception of both [yourself and others] must be accurate” (T-1.III.6:3). And this accuracy isn’t so much about details of form, though it may include them. Rather, it is about the essence of who we really are; the goal is to “look out from the perception of your own holiness to the holiness of others” (T-1.III.6:7).

This isn’t what we usually do, is it? Some problem situation confronts us, and we immediately start thinking, “Okay, what do I have to do to solve this problem?” As the “Rules for Decision” section of the Text reminds us, even if we believe in spiritual guidance, our big mistake is that we ask for a solution to the problem without first asking how to see the problem correctly: “You still make up your mind, and *then* decide to ask what you should do” (T.30.I.3:2).

Of course, sometimes we really are called to do something, and eventually the question of what to do will need to be asked—indeed, I’ll be discussing it below. But in the Course’s view, this is not priority one. Instead, we first need to ask, “Holy Spirit, how would you have me *see* this situation and everyone involved in it?” As that section on the Golden Rule says, “As you perceive, so shall you behave” (T-1.III.6:1). Once we start to open the eyes of Christ and thus (at least to some degree) see the love and holiness at the root of everything, *then* we will be guided about what to do.

As with the special function, many people in the world don’t even believe such vision is an option, and even those who do don’t reach for it consistently. It’s just so easy to make snap judgments about a situation and then let every decision that follows flow from those mistaken judgments. As with finding our special function, opening the eyes of Christ is a process that takes time and effort, with the assistance of all the tools the Course provides us. One way or another, though, I think we simply must develop the habit of stepping back when a problem confronts us, questioning our perception of the situation, and asking for help to see the situation with the eyes of love.

This issue of vision also crops up in Patricia’s work. As I’ve learned more about the issue of migration, I’ve come to realize that at the heart of the problem is the profound difficulty that people have with looking at *everyone* involved with love. On one side are those who condemn or harm the migrants in one form or another, who look upon them as disposable people instead of Sons of God. On the other side are the human rights defenders and aid workers, who are devoted to helping the migrants but also tend to reject and despise those who condemn or hurt them—xenophobic people, police, government officials, members of organized crime groups, etc. Even those who are trying to love are all too often so blinded by anger and hatred that they throw up their hands in despair and lose hope.

How can we overcome this? The Course cuts right to the chase:

You cannot know your brother when you attack him. Attack is always made upon a stranger. You are making him a stranger by misperceiving him, and so you cannot know him. It is because you have made him a stranger that you are afraid of him. Perceive him correctly so that you can know him. There are no strangers in God’s creation. (T-3.III.7:2-7)

Of course! The real issue here is how we perceive everyone involved in this situation: Do we see them as *strangers*, or do we see them as *brothers*? If we see them as strangers, we will inevitably fear and attack them. If we see them as brothers, we will come to know them as fellow members of the family of God. Whatever the earthly form solutions may be to the complex issue of migration, they must emerge from a vision that shows us, in words of Robert’s that Patricia and I repeat frequently: “Everyone matters, everyone matters equally, everyone matters immensely.” As we perceive, so shall we behave.

This is the vision I need to bring to every aspect of my life. Therefore, doing my best to really see things differently with the help of the Course has become an essential practice for me. There are so many wonderful practices, especially in the Workbook, that aim to give us a new vision of people and situations, practices that are meant to open up the eyes of Christ in us and show us the vision of innocence and love that shines forth from everyone and everything. I have come to realize that if I want to accomplish the purpose God has for me in this life, seeing with this vision is my *first* priority. “Above all else, I want to see things differently.”

Guidance: “Help me to perform whatever miracles you want of me today”

Just as vision stems from devotion to my purpose, so guidance stems from devotion to vision. As I alluded to earlier, once I have at least caught a glimpse of true vision of the situation, *then* it’s time to ask those questions about what to do. It’s always struck me that in the Course, the Voice Who gives us true perception of situations is the same Voice Who gives us guidance about what to do in those situations. Therefore, accessing His help to see correctly also gives me access to His guidance about what to do to fulfill the purpose He has given me. I can and must ask the Holy Spirit or Jesus, in the words that were originally in the Course’s first paragraph, to “help me to perform whatever miracles you want of me today” (Urtext).

Needless to say, always asking the Holy Spirit for guidance about what to do is a bedrock Course teaching. Without such guidance, it tells us, we are completely clueless, for we simply don't have the equipment to judge anything rightly, whether the issue is how to see *or* what to do. This passage from Section 10 of the Manual perhaps describes our current condition most succinctly:

Judgment in the usual sense is impossible. This is not an opinion but a fact. In order to judge anything rightly, one would have to be fully aware of an inconceivably wide range of things; past, present and to come. One would have to recognize in advance all the effects of his judgments on everyone and everything involved in them in any way. And one would have to be certain there is no distortion in his perception, so that his judgment would be wholly fair to everyone on whom it rests now and in the future. Who is in a position to do this? Who except in grandiose fantasies would claim this for himself? (M-10.3:1-7)

Who indeed? As the section goes on, it describes the only solution to this otherwise hopeless dilemma:

Make then but one more judgment. It is this: There is Someone with you Whose judgment is perfect. He does know all the facts; past, present and to come. He does know all the effects of His judgment on everyone and everything involved in any way. And He is wholly fair to everyone, for there is no distortion in His perception.

Therefore lay judgment down, not with regret but with a sigh of gratitude. (M-10.4:6-5:1)

Over time, I have come to realize more and more how absolutely essential the Holy Spirit's guidance is. As with the other two components of my foundation here, many people in the world don't believe there's any such thing as higher guidance, and even those who do believe in it access it inconsistently. But whatever we call it—whether it is the Holy Spirit or Allah or Buddha nature or the Goddess or the wisdom of the universe—I think we need to learn how to access it consistently. Without it, however good our intentions may be and however much we are trying to make the world a better place, we will continue to stumble along like the proverbial blind leading the blind. We are toast without it.

Certainly this is true of me, for if I've learned anything in this life, it's that of myself I know so little. For example, now that I've lived in Mexico for close to three years, I realize just how little I really knew about Mexico and the reasons so many people from Mexico and points farther south are migrating to the United States. I'm a pretty intelligent guy who followed the migration issue before I came here (I lived in Arizona, after all, a state where Latin American migration is a big issue), but now that I'm here, I realize how ignorant I was in many ways. Even the best books and journalism cannot capture what life is really like here. And of course, I *still* know very little compared to how much there is to know.

But it's so easy to forget the importance of asking for guidance, including guidance about how to be most helpful to people whom we want to help. I have found this too in my conversations with Patricia about her work. As I mentioned, most of the organizations she works with are Catholic organizations, but though their work is rooted in a religious mission, I've been surprised at how little they bring God into it. I've been to some workshops and seminars, and when leaders (many of whom are priests and nuns) talk about work with migrants, so often they speak in secular terms, approaching the problem from various sociopolitical perspectives that make little to no reference to God.

Don't get me wrong: I think secular research and problem solving are essential parts of the work. We should draw from every resource we have, and I think such research is one of many ways through which the Holy Spirit speaks. And of course, even church organizations have to speak in secular terms when they work with nonreligious organizations or governments (the Mexican government, like that of the United States, is officially secular). Even so, I find myself wondering, "Where's God?" To my surprise, even in workshops that are unabashedly Catholic, complete with daily Mass, I've seen very little praying and asking for God's guidance about this very difficult, complicated, literally life-and-death situation. I've joked with Patricia that if the Catholics don't ask for God's guidance, who will? As a result of our conversations, she's actually trying to bring more guidance seeking into the process of the Catholic groups she works for.

As for me, as I've said, I've come to realize just how absolutely essential it is to be guided by the Holy Spirit. Of course, like the rest of us, I have found that it's not an easy matter to access that guidance. I have my resistance to it, and I need to be humble when I think I've received it: As Jesus reminded Helen once, "Do not assume that you are right because an answer seems to come from Him" (Special Messages). But I use the Course's practices to do my best to discern His guidance as well as I possibly can. To accomplish my purpose in God's plan, I must not only see with vision but *act* on that vision. There are miracles He wants me to perform for particular brothers this very day, and to learn what those are, I try to begin every day with the practice I shared earlier: "Help me to perform whatever miracles you want of me today."

What can we do to develop this foundation?

The short answer to this question is the same short answer I give to pretty much any question about how Course students can make spiritual progress: Walk the path of the Course. Indeed, I have found that the “study-practice-extension” framework we emphasize so much at the Circle dovetails nicely with the “purpose-vision-guidance” triad. Study of the Course gives us the intellectual rationale for these things. Practice of the Course helps us develop our skill in these things. And extension is at the heart of all these things: Extension is the purpose of life, vision is *what* we extend, and guidance tells us *how* to extend.

Each of these three components of the foundation is such a massive topic in itself that I can’t really do it justice in this brief article. That being said, I can say a bit here. In a nutshell, I have a number of practices I like to use to develop each of these three components. (Since I’m doing post-Workbook practice, I choose which practices to do each day.) Now, these aren’t the only kinds of practices that I do, because as I mentioned at the beginning, I do not want this to become an oversimplification of the Course. The Course has many ideas other than the three basic ideas I’m talking about here, and many practices to help those various ideas sink deeper into our minds. Nevertheless, I do like to make practices about purpose, vision, and guidance a regular part of my repertoire.

Regarding purpose, I like repeating words that remind me of my special function and the importance of fulfilling it, like these from Lesson 317:

I have a special place to fill; a role for me alone. Salvation waits until I take this part as what I choose to do. Until I make this choice, I am the slave of time and human destiny. But when I willingly and gladly go the way my Father’s plan appointed me to go, then will I recognize salvation is already here, already given all my brothers and already mine as well. (W-pII.317.1:1-4)

Regarding vision, I like to repeat words that remind me of the importance of seeing with Christ’s vision, like these from lesson 271:

Each day, each hour, every instant, I am choosing what I want to look upon, the sounds I want to hear, the witnesses to what I want to be the truth for me. Today I choose to look upon what Christ would have me see, to listen to God’s Voice, and seek the witnesses to what is true in God’s creation. (W-pII.271.1:1-2)

Regarding guidance, I like to repeat words that remind me of the importance of accessing guidance, like this prayer from Lesson 275:

Your healing Voice protects all things today, and so I leave all things to You. I need be anxious over nothing. For Your Voice will tell me what to do and where to go; to whom to speak and what to say to him, what thoughts to think, what words to give the world. The safety that I bring is given me. Father, Your Voice protects all things through me. (W-pII.275.2:1-5)

One thing I’ve done at times is three-day cycles: one day focusing on a “purpose” practice, one day focusing on a “vision” practice, and one day focusing on a “guidance” practice. And when I’m facing a particular situation that I need to respond to, I’ll often ask some version of the three questions that form my foundation:

*What is this situation **for**?*
How would You have me see this situation differently?
What miracles do you want of me in this situation?

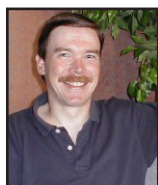
Sometimes, if I’m facing a particularly difficult situation, I’ll do some longer, concentrated practices with each of the three elements. And sometimes, if I want a very quick reminder when I’m in the middle of some difficult situation, I’ll shorten these questions to a repetition of three simple words: “purpose, vision, guidance.” This may sound like a little thing, but it can be enough to remind me of my priorities, and this reminder can help me handle the situation far more effectively, whatever challenges it may throw my way.

Conclusion

For me, this has turned out to be a great foundation for a fulfilling life. It replaces that sensation of feeling confused and overwhelmed with a sense of firm grounding and a life that makes sense. It replaces the chaos with a clear sense of direc-

tion. As I go through each day, I try to remember my purpose: What is my life *for*? I ask the Holy Spirit's help in how to see, because above all else I want to see things differently. And I ask the Holy Spirit's guidance for what to do each moment, so I can perform whatever miracles *He* wants of me this day.

If you are feeling unfulfilled in your life, I'm hoping that this foundation might be helpful for you as well. I encourage you to begin (or continue) the process of finding and fulfilling your purpose in life—your special function. I encourage you to do what you can to make vision your first priority. And I encourage you to do what you can to get in touch with the Holy Spirit's guidance for every aspect of your life. You may find, as I have, that these “first principles” can help you get in touch with the life God really wants you to live, so that when your life is done, you too will have the joy of knowing that you did what you were meant to do, that you really did make a difference, that you really did make this world a better place, that you brought us a few more steps closer to awakening in Heaven. I wish you a most joyful and fulfilling life!



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CIRCLE MAILBOX

Here are some responses we received to Robert's article in A Better Way #126, “‘Shall We Not Speak to Him?’ What to Do with the Prayers in the Workbook.”

As I read your article and came upon the first two lines of the prayer (*Be in my mind, my Father, when I wake, and shine on me throughout the day today*), it dawned upon me that the reason I have never taken these prayers seriously is because I was afraid they would work. If I pray to God He may answer me and that scares me. Before, I used to think it was useless to pray to God, remembering from my childhood the feeling that God had abandoned me and prayer was useless. But today as I read the prayer, I became aware I was absolutely terrified He would answer.

Looks like I have some work to do.

— Hal Seeley

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This is a beautiful and very helpful article. I have often felt that students of the Course need extra encouragement with prayer. Thanks so much for putting this together.

— Joan Bachmann

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Just read your article in the current edition of *A Better Way*, and find myself inspired to offer a few words. First, it might interest you to know that I found I had no resistance whatever to anything you wrote in that article.

Indeed, when it comes to *anything* pertaining to Course-inspired teachings—as of this moment—I can’t even remember if I *ever* have! That notwithstanding, I also found myself mildly prompted to share with you some thoughts which surfaced for me as I was reading and digesting what you had to say about Jesus’ way of teaching us about prayer—which, once more, I have no problem with. Yet I found myself *also* admitting that that wasn’t the way I “pray,” because praying to God feels so natural to me—and always has for me, in some strange way. In short, not “a big deal” in my life because I see it as the *only* “deal” (as a result of my somewhat strange Catholic, Unitarian, ACIM background, etc.)—all of which (once more, in some strange way) have helped me feel closer to God as THE predominant “fact” in my life. That’s truly a “what’s so,” and, seemingly, *never* a “so what” (so far as I can fathom through my current 85-year-old state of human consciousness). Trust that makes some kind of sense to you.

In other words, you could say I experience myself as having a very pleasant and informal relationship with God—strange and un-Course-like as that may sound and feel when I word it that way. And never has this been more so than lately during my daily meditations, prayers, and *very* casual “conversations” with God—which lately have led me to experience some true “highs” (if I may put it that way!). And, again, none of which in any way is meant to invalidate anything you wrote in your article.

And which also means, let me emphasize, that everything in my life feels “exactly right” (as I continue to experience “recovery” from my recent stroke, which, increasingly, I am also seeing and feeling as some kind of miraculous blessing).

— Val Scott