



Every Problem Quietly Resolved

The Liberating Problem-Solving Approach of “The Quiet Answer” (T-27.IV)

by Greg Mackie

Life is full of problems, isn't it? We have countless decisions to make every day, and we are often conflicted inside as we ask ourselves the questions we think need answers—which choice will really make me happy? When our problems involve other people, a whole additional level of conflict enters in, because of course different people have very different ideas about what will bring happiness. The questions multiply, and it often feels like a zero-sum game: the better an answer looks to me the worse it looks to the other person, and vice versa. The situation is so daunting, it's exhausting just thinking about it. How can we possibly solve problems in a way that gets us out of conflict, that makes *everyone* genuinely and wholeheartedly happy?

I recently taught a class on a Text section that brilliantly addresses this issue: Chapter 27, section IV, “The Quiet Answer.” It tells us that when we are facing a problem and feeling conflicted in any way about how to solve it, the way out lies in rising above the battleground and seeing the problem from an entirely new perspective: one in which the real question that confronts us becomes clear and the real answer follows with equal clarity. In this article, I'd like to summarize this section's teaching on how to solve problems in a way that undoes inner and outer conflict alike, a way that we can apply to our daily lives right here and right now.

How do we normally solve problems?

When a problem confronts us in our lives—whether it's a personal problem that's pulling us in ten directions at once, or a problem involving another person whom we're trying to come to terms with—what do we typically do? I think most of the time, most of us do pretty much the same thing: We ask ourselves some version of the question “What arrangement of forms in this situation will make me happy?” In one way or another we tell ourselves, as Lesson 71 says, that “if this [external situation] were different, I would be saved” (W-pI.71.2:2). We ask ourselves what things need to happen, carefully weigh all of the possible options, negotiate with the other person if the conflict is interpersonal, and hope that through all of this we'll arrive at a solution that will make us happy.

How well does this really work? I think if we're honest with ourselves, we have to admit that the results are mixed at best. Sure, sometimes things work out reasonably well, but the whole process is fraught with difficulties. According to the “Quiet Answer” section, the central difficulty is that the problem is “set in conflict,” and thus “what would be an answer from one point of view is not an answer in another light” (1:3-4; throughout this article, quotations from this Text section will include only paragraph and sentence numbers). Can't we all relate to this? Given the conflicting needs within ourselves and the conflicting agendas of different people, how can we cobble anything together that will make everyone *wholly* happy? It seems impossible, so we settle for uneasy compromises—this, we think, is the best we can do.

Why this problem-solving approach doesn't work: We're not addressing the real problem

“A problem set in conflict has no answer” (1:3). No matter what solution we come up with, no one will be truly satisfied. But why are we in this mess? Our section gives us a disturbing answer: Identifying with the ego, we don't *want* a real solution to our problem, an “answer where the conflict ends” (5:8). And the way we make sure that we don't *get* a solution is to keep the actual problem completely hidden from our awareness. We look like we're trying to solve problems, but we're not addressing the real problem.

How do we keep the real problem out of awareness? What this section describes is truly ingenious: We engage in a clever process of asking pseudo-questions to keep the question we actually need to answer safely hidden. To show how

this works, let me begin by describing the question we're trying to hide. The section calls it a "single, simple question" (3:4) and an "honest question" (5:6, 6:1)—what the Course elsewhere calls a "real question" (see, for instance, T-4.V.6:3-4). This question is not explicitly stated in the section and could presumably take many forms, but based on the section's description of the process, it seems to be any question that facilitates the single choice the Course is always calling upon us to make: the choice between truth and illusion, between God and the ego, between condemnation and forgiveness, etc. (One example of a real question from earlier in the Course is "Where can I go for protection?" [T-4.V.5:1], the answer to which is essentially "God, not the ego.")

Of course, the ego doesn't want us to have anything to do with this question, because it has the potential to open our minds to God. So, clinging to our identification with the ego, we do two things. First, deep down in a place that is now buried in the unconscious, we affirm the *wrong* answer to that real question, the ego's answer. Second, on the surface, we ask questions that look like questions but are really no more than veiled *statements* of that wrong answer to the real question.

A question of the world, then, is not a single, simple question but rather a "double question" (3:5, 4:3). It is "double" because it implicitly involves two questions—the real question to which it has already given the ego's answer, and the pseudo-question that is just a restatement of that answer. A double question, then, though it implicitly involves two questions, doesn't actually ask a question at all; all it does is use the form of a question "to restate its point of view" (3:8). That is why the double question is really a "pseudo-question...It dictates the answer even as it asks" (5:1-2).

This may be difficult to understand in the abstract, but I think it will become much more clear if I lay out an example of the process:

Real question: "What am I—a Son of God or an ego?"

The ego's (buried) wrong answer to the real question: "An ego. That goes without saying."

Pseudo-question we ask: "What things can I get to meet my ego's needs?"

Do you see how the process works? There's a real and crucial question here: Am I a Son of God or an ego? Really facing this question in a deep way and realizing that we are Sons of God would change everything. But the ego naturally answers "ego" and, realizing the threat this question presents to its survival, wants to make sure the question never gets asked again. (That's why I included "That goes without saying" above—the ego wants us to accept its answer as a given.) So, the ego gives us a question that looks like a real question but is really just a statement of its wrong answer to the real question. "What things can I get to meet my ego's needs" is just another way of saying "I am an ego."

The section gives us three examples of this same basic process in action. I'll lay them out the same way here (only the lines with sentence-number references are actual quotes from the section):

Real question: "Should I choose truth or illusions?"

The ego's (buried) wrong answer to the real question: "Illusions. That goes without saying."

Pseudo-question we ask: "Of these illusions, which of them are true? Which ones establish peace and offer joy? And which can bring escape from all the pain of which this world is made?" (4:5-7, Urtext version)

Real question: "Are we innocent, or is sin real?"

The ego's (buried) wrong answer to the real question: "Sin is real. That goes without saying."

Pseudo-question we ask: "Which sin do you prefer? That is the one that you should choose. The others are not true. What can the body get that you would want the most of all? It is your servant and also your friend. But tell it what you want, and it will serve you lovingly and well." (4:10-15)

Real question: "Is sacrifice meaningful or not?" (based on 6:7)

The ego's (buried) wrong answer to the real question: "Sacrifice is meaningful. That goes without saying."

Pseudo-question we ask: "Of whom is sacrifice demanded?" (based on 6:7)

We can see in these three examples the same basic structure: There is a wrong answer to the real question, and then a pseudo-question that merely has us choose an option *within* that wrong answer—a specific *form* of the wrong answer—which leaves the wrong answer unchallenged. The wrong answer has become a statement of fact, and the only question now is what kind of illusion, sin, or sacrifice we want. It's as if we convinced ourselves that we *must* eat ice cream with

every meal, but we have a choice of chocolate, vanilla, or strawberry.

We can also see in these three examples a picture of how the world works. We think that getting certain form-level things in this world—things the Course regards as illusions—will give us joy and help us escape from pain. To get these things, we need to take them from others, which means sacrifice is demanded of someone. And to take them from others, we need to attack in one form or another, which we regard as a sin. Indeed, this section says that our pseudo-questions are questions “asked in hate” (4:2). It’s a dog-eat-dog world out there, and only the strong survive. What could be more obvious? It really does seem to go without saying.

“Thus is all questioning within the world a form of propaganda for itself” (5:3). And the more I think about the world’s questions, the more I see just how pervasive that propaganda is. Of course, we don’t normally ask these questions in the absurdly obvious forms this section describes: We usually don’t go around asking which illusion is true. But think of some the questions we do ask. We ask which country we should go to war against, not asking whether we should go to war at all. We ask how we can get back at people who hurt us, not asking whether we should get back at them at all. We ask what we need to do to land that special someone, not asking whether we should “land” a “special” someone at all. And of course, we do ask which of a long list of physical things will make us happy, not asking whether physical things can bring happiness at all.

The questions of the world, then, are merely declarations of the ideology of the ego. They “are but a way of looking, not a question asked” (4:1). And thus, as we try to solve the myriad problems that seem to confront us, we’re not addressing the real problem at all. How, then, could we ever expect to find a happy solution?

A problem-solving approach that works: Enter the holy instant and find the real solution to the real problem

How do we get out of this mess and really *solve* our problems? Obviously, if the issue is that we’re not addressing the real problem at all, what we need to do is somehow cut through the interference and address the real problem. In other words, we need to get honest enough to ask a real question, which would open us up to the real answer that the section assures us God has already provided. We’ll never do this as long as we’re on the battleground, because as we’ve seen, “a problem set in conflict has no answer.” Fortunately, God has given us a way to rise above the battleground and reach a place in our minds where the real question and the real answer are perfectly obvious: “Such is the holy instant” (2:4).

The holy instant is this section’s big answer to the dilemma it addresses. In conflict our questions have no answers and our problems have no solutions, but “in quietness are all things answered, and is every problem quietly resolved” (1:1). Why? Because “only within the holy instant can an honest question honestly be asked. And from the meaning of the question does the meaningfulness of the answer come” (6:1-2). In the holy instant, we briefly step aside from the double questions and pseudo-questions that seem to lock us into the ways of the world, and open ourselves up to a whole new point of view. We open ourselves up to the real questions that the questions of the world were designed to obscure. And thus we see the meaningfulness of the answers that already lie deep in our minds—answers that in one way or another affirm truth, innocence, generosity, peace, and God.

This rising above the battleground is crucial. During my class, a student asked if it’s possible to ask honest questions and get honest answers outside of the holy instant. After all, the Course presents us with all sorts of real questions and answers, and we can learn a lot from it even if we’re not currently in a holy instant. I’ve been thinking a lot about this, and I think it’s true that outside the holy instant, we can make a tremendous amount of progress. Yes, the Course itself is a huge contributor to that. But the implication of the section is that it is only in the holy instant, outside of the usual ego interference, that we can really ask an honest question and hear an honest answer *with all our heart*. The holy instant “is the interval in which the mind is still enough” (6:9) to let the truth all the way in. Indeed, “The answer is provided everywhere. Yet it is only here it can be heard” (6:4-5).

So, if we want a solution that will bring genuine, wholehearted happiness to everyone involved, what we’re supposed to do when we’re wrestling with a problem is to step outside of the state of conflict we’re currently in and enter a holy instant, where the real solution to the real problem lies:

It is here that all your problems should be brought and left. Here they belong, for here their answer is. And where its answer is, a problem must be simple and be easily resolved. It must be pointless to attempt to solve a problem where the answer cannot be. Yet just as surely it must be resolved, if it is brought to where the answer is. (2:5-9)

Applying this problem-solving approach to our daily lives

I find the alternative problem-solving approach this section offers to be a brilliant reversal of the way we normally do things. As I said above, when we're facing a problem, we normally ask ourselves some version of "What arrangement of forms in this situation will make me happy?" But of course, now we know that this is one of those pseudo-questions that obscures the real question. What we're supposed to do instead is set this pseudo-question entirely aside and step into a state of mind—the holy instant—where we can see the problem in a whole new light. Instead of reaching first for a form-level solution to our problem, we reach first for a new way of seeing the problem.

Okay, so what do we actually do when we're confronting a problem in our daily lives? The first thing we do, as soon as we get a chance, is to step aside from the problem and enter into a holy instant. How do we do that? The Course gives us many practices for entering into holy instants, and what we use in any particular instance will depend on the situation. If we have sufficient time to do a long exercise like the one at the end of this article, great. If we only have time to step away for five minutes—maybe we can sneak in a bathroom break—we can do a brief meditation on a mind-shifting Course idea like "I rest in God" (Lesson 109) or "This holy instant is salvation come" (Lesson 241) or "This is my holy instant of release" (Lesson 227). And if we're in the middle of a conversation with someone and can only repeat a brief Course practice in our heads, that will do. The key is that, however we do it, we step outside of our current frame of reference and reach with our minds toward that place above the battleground where all of our problems are resolved.

The section I'm examining actually reminds me a great deal of a practice earlier in the Text that is designed for resolving interpersonal conflicts. In this practice, whenever anything threatens the peace between two holy relationship partners (and of course you don't need a holy relationship partner to do this practice), the solution is to set aside the perceived problem and—guess what?—enter into a holy instant, with the help of these beautiful words:

I desire this holy instant for myself, that I may share it with my brother, whom I love.

It is not possible that I can have it without him, or he without me.

Yet it is wholly possible for us to share it now.

And so I choose this instant as the one to offer to the Holy Spirit, that His blessing may descend on us, and keep us both in peace. (T-18.V.7:3-6)

This and so many other practices the Course offers can help us enter the holy instant, where we can ask the Holy Spirit for the real question and answer, and find the real solution to whatever problem is facing us.

So far, so good. But even if we have some sort of powerful, transformative spiritual experience in that holy instant, how do we solve problems on a form level? After all, with most problems there *are* decisions to be made on that level. Should we ask form-level questions at all, especially since this section suggests that they are pseudo-questions?

Yes, we should ask those form-level questions, but only *after* we first reach for the holy instant that gives us a new way to look at the problem. The same Holy Spirit Who gives us a new perception in the holy instant also gives us guidance for what to do on the level of form. So, we can and must ask Him for guidance on a form level. The difference is that if we've first entered the holy instant, the form-level questions are no longer variations on "What arrangement of forms in this situation will make me happy?" Instead, they are a way of asking, "Holy Spirit, how can the real answer I have received be best expressed in form?" And in my experience, form-level answers that are truly helpful for everyone involved often come relatively easily once the content-level problem has been addressed. These answers really do hold the potential to make everyone wholly happy, even if this is not apparent to everyone at the time.

As I reflect on this, it seems to me that virtually everyone has experienced some version of the solution the Course is offering here. Think of this common everyday scenario: A couple is wrestling with a difficult problem that just seems intractable. They're angry, they yell, they argue and argue and argue. Then, perhaps right at that moment when the volume reaches its maximum, one of them comes to her senses. She remembers that there are things that are a lot more important than this thing they're squabbling about. She says, "You know, we need to remember what really matters here: We love each other, we're family, we want to be happy together. We can work this out." He says, "You're right," and they melt into each other's arms. The conflict is over. Oh, there may still be some form issue to resolve, but it just doesn't matter much any more, and most likely there is an easy answer to it that both will see instantly and be completely happy with.

What's happening in this scenario? In the midst of fighting over pseudo-questions, one person remembers the real question and the real answer. Problem solved. The Course's promise is that every problem can be solved this way—in fact, this is the *only* way.

Exercise

This is a little exercise that Robert created (and I tweaked a bit) to help us put into practice the section we've just examined. In the exercise, you'll start by picking a problem that you're currently wrestling with. The assumption behind the exercise is that you're currently dealing with it in the ego-based way the section describes (which must be true to some extent if the problem is distressing you in any way). Okay, here we go...

Try to think of a "normal" problem in your life, a problem with your work life, or your money, or your living situation, or your love life—a problem you are currently distressed or upset about, to any degree.

Now realize that in contemplating this problem and what its solution might be, you are in conflict within yourself. You are pulled in the direction of God, and in the opposite direction, that of your ego. Your own preferences are in conflict with each other. Moreover, you see your interests in conflict with the interests of others. You see yourself on the battleground.

Realize that no solution can satisfy all the sides of this conflict in your mind or with other people, for each side will see the solution from its own vantage point. There's no way the conflict can end in a way that will make everyone wholly happy.

*In fact, your mind, identified with the ego, does not want the conflict to end. It wants to stay in conflict. It assumes that the only answer is battle, war, hate. It therefore only wants an option **within** this answer.*

And so it does not ask an honest question. It asks a question that assumes the validity of the conflict and then favors one of the options within the conflict.

The question takes this form: "What illusion out here in the world will make me happy?" Can you see your mind asking a question like this in the context of your problem? Any question that seeks an external solution as the way to peace is a form of this question.

This question really amounts to: "Which sin do I prefer? Which one is true?"

The sin that you prefer always asks someone else to sacrifice (which is what makes it a "sin"). The question, then, amounts to: "Who will have to make a sacrifice so that I can be happy? Who needs to pay in order to balance the scales of justice and solve this problem?" Can you see this element in your question? Can you see yourself contemplating solutions that will ask for sacrifice from someone else?

These questions are really questions asked in hate—they are about gaining from someone else's loss. And hate is not a question, but a point of view. These questions assume the validity of war. Another way to look at it is that these questions affirm that sin is real. That again is a statement, not a question.

Can you see how the questions that have come out of your problem are really "a form of propaganda" (5:3) for the world?

This section says that the answer lies in a state of mind that is beyond the conflict, a state of mind above the battleground, a state of mind that has reached to quietness. In this state the answer lies waiting for you. In this state your mind is quiet enough to ask an honest question, and to hear an answer that is not just a repeat of the assumptions behind the question. This state is the holy instant.

To enter this state, quiet your mind.

Forget about the past, forget about the future.

Remember that this instant is the only time there is.

Try to drop all of your preconceptions about the situation.

Go through various aspects of it and realize that you don't know what they mean.

You don't know what your best interests are.

You don't know what anything in the situation is for.

Set aside all of your beliefs about what the problem really is and what the solution must be.

Now you are ready to ask an honest question,

a single, simple question,

one that asks for an answer that is truly new and different.

Say to the Holy Spirit,

"Let me recognize the problem so it can be solved."

"Let me recognize my problems have been solved."

Ask the Holy Spirit,

"How do You want me to find happiness in this situation?"

“How do You want me to give happiness in this situation?”
“How can I leave the battleground, and take everyone with me?”



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

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CIRCLE MAILBOX

The following are reader responses to Robert's article in A Better Way #130, "The Holy Spirit: The Voice for God or the Voice of God?"

What a beautiful and most helpful gift you have given us here! My heartfelt thanks go to you for all your detailed studying of the text and for your loving outlay of all the phrases that make this point. Now many of us students can relax and go back to inner dialogues with the Father as we were taught to do in Sunday School so long ago (I was born in 1943 and discovered the Course in the 1980s).

— Joan Bachmann

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Thank you so much for this article. I was thinking about this topic this morning; thinking, questioning whether God is speaking to me directly, or is it the Holy Spirit? I talk to the Holy Spirit a lot, ask Him questions, but when I get an answer say "Thank you God," which led me to the question of who was it? Does it matter? It's the same source; and yet I feel that hearing from God is more personal, more direct and loving. I didn't really think about the Holy Spirit as a pure conduit to God until the Course and therefore felt hesitant at first with asking but it has been such a relief to know that He is always available and will always answer. Bit of confusion here, but I am thinking now that it feels that Holy Spirit is the more practical one; knowing answers to thinking problems, righting my mind, and giving me directions. But it's God that tells me He loves me, whereas the Holy Spirit is a little bit once removed.

All in all it's a fascinating subject. Sitting here thinking some more about it I will probably keep asking the Holy Spirit for solutions to a problem, as it is somewhat of a instant habit; receiving the answer seems as though it comes directly from God. But, also, I "got" this, this morning: that I can talk directly to God as well; be in direct contact with Him. Because of my past there has been a place in my mind that said I wasn't supposed to do this. Duh?

— Carole Cordes