

A Better Way

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Helen and Bill's Joining: A Window onto the Heart of *A Course in Miracles*

by Robert Perry

A Course in Miracles is really inseparable from the events that gave it birth. Those events are more than just the soil out of which it sprang. In hindsight, they turn out to be living parables of its teaching. And as such, they have the ability to illumine that teaching. They are another angle from which we can locate the Course's message and get a firm handle on it.

Nowhere is this more true than with the experience that was the catalyst for whole thing: Helen Schucman and Bill Thetford's joining, in June of 1965, in search of a better way. This experience was not only the birth of the Course, it is also an important part of the Course itself. Although several of Helen's experiences are subtly alluded to in the Course (her "Blue-Gray Bird" dream is echoed in T-23.III.6, her priestess memory in W-pI.109.8, her scroll cave vision in W-pI.169.5), this, to my knowledge, is the only one of her experiences in which the actual event is directly mentioned. By my count, it is directly referred to at least *118 times*, in passages that grant it the highest significance. This experience, then, stands alone. What makes it so singularly important?

We might assume that the answer is simply that the Course likes to mention its own birth, just as we like to celebrate our own birthday. Yet that is not the reason. As we will see, the reason is that this experience, more than anything else that happened to Helen and Bill, is a window onto the very heart of *A Course in Miracles*. If we understand this one experience, we understand what the Course is all about.

The story

To appreciate Helen and Bill's joining in June of 1965, we need to go back much further.¹ Early in her adult life, Helen had put to rest her consuming but unsuccessful search for God. So now she began, as she later wrote, "to search for a better way to spend the rest of my life."² After endless indecision, she settled on a career in psychology and, already in her forties, went to New York University to get her doctorate. She positively excelled, and after completing her thesis, was offered a teaching post at the university.

Helen's career was poised to launch, and she had visions of heading up a large research department. All she needed was the approval of her grant applications. Since she was an expert grant writer, their approval was virtually assured. The day her applications were being considered, she did a rather uncharacteristic thing. To her own surprise, she walked into a Catholic church, lit a candle, and gave God one last chance. She prayed for the approval of her grant proposals, informing Him that her request was nonnegotiable. She wrote:

Even before I finished making my request I knew what the outcome would be. It was as if I were being told that the department I was in was the wrong place for me and I was not to stay there. The

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PUBLISHED BY

The Circle of Atonement
Teaching and Healing Center
P.O. Box 4238

West Sedona, AZ 86340

Phone: (928) 282-0790

Fax: (928) 282-0523

Toll-free (orders only): (888) 357-7520

E-mail: info@circleofa.com

Website: www.circleofa.com

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WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT SAYS

A Course in Miracles is a spiritual path. Its purpose is to train us to work miracles—to accept and extend to others the shifts in perception that awaken us to God. It consists of three volumes, which signify the three aspects of its program:

◆ *Text*: Through studying the teaching, the Course's thought system first enters our minds.

◆ *Workbook for Students*: Through doing the practice, the Course's thought system penetrates more and more deeply into our minds.

◆ *Manual for Teachers*: Through extending our healed perception to others, the Course's thought system receives its final reinforcement and becomes the only thing in our minds.

The Course's message is that the source of our suffering is not the world's mistreatment of us, but rather our egocentric attack on the world. This attack convinces us that we have defiled our nature beyond repair, that we are irredeemably guilty. Yet the Course says true reality cannot be defiled; it is a realm of pure, changeless, unified spirit. This realization allows us to forgive the world's apparent mistreatment of us by recognizing that it did not actually occur. And as we see this forgiveness come forth from us—see that we are capable of something genuinely loving and egoless—we gradually realize that we never defiled ourselves. Thus we awaken to the untouched innocence of our true nature.

CIRCLE EVENTS

REGULAR CLASSES/SEDONA, AZ

Daily Morning Workbook Class
With Greg Mackie and Robert Perry
Weekdays, 8:30 - 9:30 am

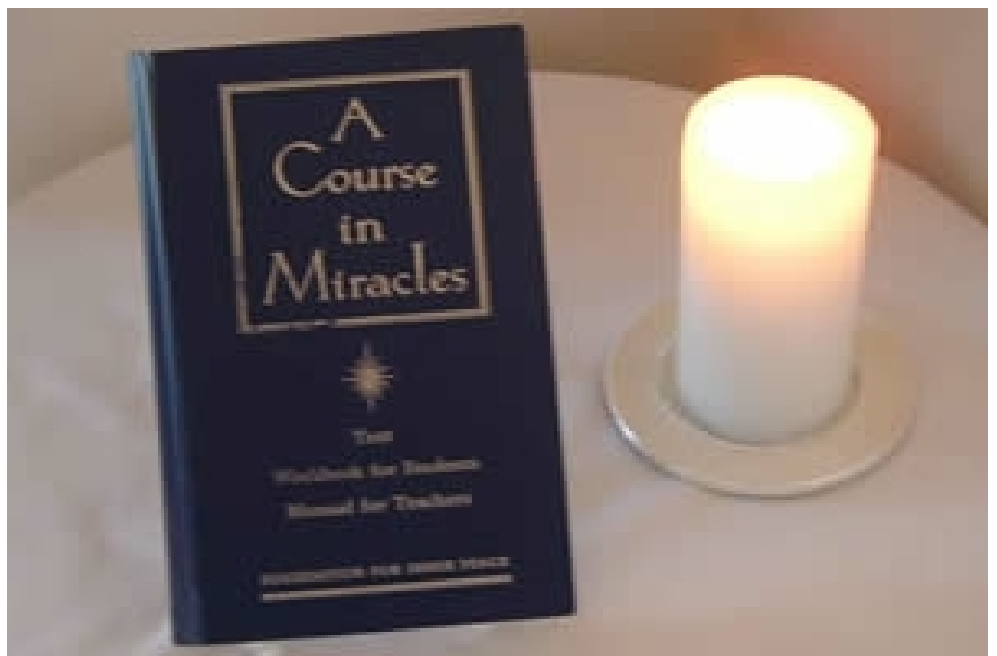
Weekly Evening Class
With Robert Perry
Deepen your understanding of a variety of Course topics
Tuesdays, 7:00 - 8:30 pm
Call our office for details

REGULAR CLASSES/PORTLAND, OR

Weekly Morning Class
With Allen Watson
In-depth study of the Text of *A Course in Miracles*
Thursdays, 10:00 am - 12:00 pm
Contact Allen Watson
allen@circleofa.com - (503) 284-3619

OTHER EVENTS

Salt Lake City, Utah
2005 ACIM Tribute and Conference
"Accessing the Love in Every Heart"
With 23 speakers, including Robert Perry
April 22-24, 2005
Information: www.iammiracle.org
Contact Rev. Sue Borg
sueborg@xmission.com - (801) 261-2227





This diagram illustrates the pattern that arises from various Course concepts (holy instant, miracle, forgiveness, holy encounter, holy relationship, special function, social vision) intersecting at Helen and Bill's moment of joining. To appreciate this diagram, you'll need to look at each part separately. First, leading up to the moment of joining is a painful past (see left-hand side), full of repeating patterns of imprisonment. Then comes the moment in which everything changes (see center circle). This moment is a holy instant, an act of forgiveness, a holy encounter, and a miracle—all at once. The joining that occurs seems to have rather mundane motivations, but contained in these are unconscious motivations (see bottom center) to invite in the Holy Spirit and accept the goal of salvation. There is an immediate divine response (see top center): God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit all enter into the relationship. Then, out of this holy instant comes a new future (see right-hand side), filled with healing and dedicated to the journey to God.

(Many thanks to Vin LoPresti for his execution of this diagram.)

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grants would not come through and I would have to look elsewhere for a job.³

She stormed out of the church and went home, where she found out that her grant applications had indeed been turned down. God had let her down again, and she was out of a job.

She spent weeks doing nothing but feel sorry for herself. She finally decided to call a friend in the field. He gave her a list of promising leads, but before she could call them, he called her back and told her to instead call William Thetford at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center. It turns out that right after Helen had called this friend looking for a job, Bill had called the same person looking for a person to *fill* a job. He had just taken the position as head of the Psychology Department at Presbyterian Hospital and was looking for a good research psychologist.

Helen didn't like the sound of the job, but she did call Bill and agree to meet with him. When she walked into his office, she made a kind of involuntary silent remark to herself, one that made no sense to her at the time:

“And there he is,” I said to myself. “He’s the one I’m supposed to help.”⁴

The job he offered her carried neither impressive title nor hefty salary, but for some reason Helen accepted it. She gave herself reasons why, but she said later:

In view of later events, however, it seems likely that I did not really have much choice in the matter. That was where I was supposed to be.⁵

She later found out that Bill, too, had ended up at Columbia-Presbyterian in an odd and unexpected way. Bill was offered the job, but was not interested, so he made an unreasonable request. He said that he would take the job if they would promote him to being an Associate Professor. And to his great surprise, they did.

When Helen finally started her job, she found it to be, as she said, “really ghastly.”⁶ This seemed to be a combination of two things. First, the project she was working on had no real support from the hospital. They didn't have space for it, and finally housed it in a nearby apartment. Second, “it was carried out in an atmosphere of suspicion and competitiveness to which I had not been previously exposed.”⁷ In short, the department in which she had joined Bill was a disaster.

She and Bill felt drawn together, both personally and professionally, and worked hard to build up the Psychology Department, yet their own relationship was full of friction and strain. They were just too different. Helen was intense, anxious,

and assertive, while Bill was soft-spoken and somewhat aloof and withdrawn. While Helen could be sharp-tongued and abrasive, Bill, in the face of conflict, would become unresponsive, only to get openly angry later on. Add to this the fact that Helen, who was married, was attracted to Bill, who was homosexual, and you get a very complicated situation. Helen wrote:

The relationship between Bill and myself deteriorated steadily....We began to get much less work done, while experiencing greater and greater fatigue....It became more and more evident that the best thing for me to do was to leave. However, Bill and I seemed trapped in a relationship which, although we hated it in many ways, could not be escaped.⁸

Helen and Bill found themselves surrounded by ever-widening circles of interpersonal conflict, first conflict with each other, then with others in their department, then with other departments, and finally with other medical centers. They seemed to be standing on a battlefield that had no boundary.

This brings us to the moment which changed everything. The two of them had become involved with a research project at Cornell University Medical Center, which required of them an hour-long meeting each week, a meeting which, as Ken Wapnick put it, “grew to epitomize all that was wrong in their personal and professional lives.”⁹ The meetings at Cornell were filled with the same intense aggression and anger that pervaded the rest of their lives. Each week they dreaded going.

One afternoon in June of 1965, on their way to one of these meetings, they stopped by at Bill’s apartment. There, Bill delivered, with great difficulty and embarrassment, and after several aborted tries, a preplanned and very earnest speech.

He had been thinking things over and had concluded we were using the wrong approach. “There must,” he said, “be another way.” Our attitudes had become so negative that we could not work anything out. He had therefore decided to try to look at things differently.

Bill proposed, quite specifically, to try out this new approach that day at the research meeting. He was not going to get angry and was determined not to attack. He was going to look for a constructive side in what people there said and did, and was not going to focus on mistakes and point up errors. He was going to cooperate rather than compete....When it was over he waited for my response in obvious discomfort. Whatever reaction he may have expected, it was certainly not the one he got. I jumped up, told Bill with genuine conviction that he was perfectly right, and said I would join in the new approach with him.¹⁰

What strikes me about Bill’s better way (he and Helen called it both “another way” and a “better way”) is how Course-like it was, here before the Course ever existed. Every point he made is in the Course:

- the determination to “see things differently”¹¹
- taking “a stand against our anger”¹² and attack
- seeing “only the loving thoughts”¹³ in the actions of others
- removing “your focus on your brother’s sins”¹⁴
- choosing cooperation (the Course’s original dictation said: “Don’t lose sight of the emphasis on cooperation, or the *not singular*”¹⁵) over competition (“the ego...is competitive rather than loving”¹⁶)

It’s all there in the Course. This underscores something we often overlook: just how much getting along with others is part of *A Course in Miracles*. Bill’s better way was not only the catalyst for the Course’s existence, it is also *embedded in the Course*. Since this better way was about interpersonal harmony, then to some significant degree, the Course must be as well. In its own unique way, then, the Course is making the same plea as Rodney King: “Can’t we all just get along?”

Helen and Bill had no idea what they had set in motion that afternoon. However, even at the time, they realized that their lives had set off in a new direction. Two streams of effects seemed to flow out from this event. First, of course, Helen began having a series of spontaneous visions, dreams, and psychic experiences, which culminated, four months later, in a voice in her head saying, “This is a course in miracles. Please take notes.” What is less well-known is that, as a result of this joining, Helen and Bill instituted major changes in their personal and professional lives. First, they slowly turned the department around:

The facts are simple. The whole climate of the department gradually changed for the better. Bill worked particularly hard on this, determined to turn hostilities into friendships by perceiving the relationships differently....Tensions lessened and antagonisms dropped away. The wrong people left, though on friendly terms, and the right ones came along almost immediately....In time the department became smooth-functioning, relaxed, and efficient.¹⁷

Second, they undertook a conscious reform of their personal relationships. Helen resurrected earlier friendships that for var-

ious reasons had broken up. And Bill, too, devoted much energy to straightening out his relationships. As most of us know, their efforts at healing their own relationship were largely unsuccessful, yet that shouldn't eclipse all of the interpersonal healing that *did* come out of their attempts to live a better way.

Just as earlier they had been encircled by concentric rings of discord, now it was as if wave upon wave of healing radiated out from their joining, changing their own lives, healing their personal relationships, and turning around their department. Forty years later, those waves are still going, as the fruit of that joining, *A Course in Miracles*, reaches into new lives and into new lands. For all we know, those waves will never stop.

What the Course says about Helen and Bill's experience

The Course itself grants immense significance to Helen and Bill's joining. As I stated at the beginning, this event is referred to over one hundred times in the Course.¹⁸ If you add up all of these passages, you get over four thousand words, a block of material almost as long as the Clarification of Terms. This experience, then, is not just a part of the story of the Course. It is *part of the Course itself*. To give you an idea of what I am talking about, here are a few of the Course's references to this experience:

You undertook, together, to invite the Holy Spirit into your relationship.¹⁹

You who hold your brother's hand also hold mine, for when you joined each other you were not alone.²⁰

Be sure of this; love has entered your special relationship, and entered fully at your weak request.²¹

In these quotes, you get a sense of the huge significance the Course is assigning this event. They say that by joining in this better way, Helen and Bill invited the Holy Spirit into their relationship, took hold of Jesus' hand, and invited love into their relationship. This pattern holds true throughout the one hundred-plus passages: again and again, untold significance is granted to this experience.

In these passages, one gets the impression that the visible event was just the tip of the iceberg, that most of what happened was beneath the surface. There were requests being made, calls being answered, and presences entering their relationship of which Bill and Helen had no conscious idea. The Course, therefore, tells a kind of below-the-surface version of this story, one that parallels the visible story but adds new dimensions of meaning to it.

The below-the-surface version begins long before June of 1965. During the years preceding this event, the Course implies, Jesus and the Holy Spirit were quietly calling to Helen and Bill,²² appealing to them,²³ holding out a silent offer of life,²⁴ all of which was falling on deaf ears. This finds surprising corroboration in what Helen confided to her first analyst—that she had a “recurring experience of feeling the presence of a man behind her left shoulder, trying to get her attention which she steadfastly refused to give.”²⁵

Then came that afternoon in Bill's apartment. On the conscious level, Helen and Bill agreed to join together in a noble goal: trying to live out a way in which people could actually get along. This joining involved having faith in each other,²⁶ for you don't join in a goal with someone when you have no faith that he can reach that goal. And it involved forgiving each other,²⁷ for you don't wholeheartedly join with someone you deeply resent.

Beneath this conscious level, however, in the hidden bulk of the iceberg, a great deal more was going on. Helen and Bill were answering that longstanding call. As such, they were inviting the Holy Spirit²⁸ and Jesus²⁹ to come dwell in their relationship. They were embracing the Holy Spirit's purpose as their purpose.³⁰ They were choosing God as their goal³¹ and calling on truth to come join them.³² They were seeing each other as the perfect cradle in which their own true Self could be reborn.³³

The Course is fully aware that none of this was conscious: “You do not even realize you have accepted the Holy Spirit's purpose as your own,”³⁴ it says. While their conscious minds were joining in Bill's rather secular better way, some deeper element in their minds was speaking directly to the Holy Spirit and saying, “Yes, I accept Your purpose as my own.”

The Holy Spirit's purpose was accepted by the part of your mind the ego knows not of. No more did you.³⁵

I find this to be truly fascinating. I've long been aware that the Course teaches that our conscious moments of anger actually contain unconscious layers of motivation, including the urge to collect guilt, attack God, and murder our true Self. What is new to me is that it also works the other way around. Hidden within our choice to join with another person is a series of sublime unconscious impulses, impulses to accept the Holy Spirit, invite truth into our lives, and come home to God.

Those impulses are prayers, and those prayers—the ones we don't even know we are making—are what the Holy Spirit answers. His answer to Helen and Bill meant that a virtual flood of divine light and power swept into their minds and their relationship. In passage after passage, the Course speaks of the glory that now poured into the relationship. The Holy Spirit,³⁶

Jesus,³⁷ God,³⁸ Heaven,³⁹ truth,⁴⁰ love,⁴¹ and peace⁴² all entered in.

Heaven has entered quietly, for all illusions have been gently brought unto the truth in you, and love has shined upon you, blessing your relationship with truth. God and His whole creation have entered it together. How lovely and how holy is your relationship, with the truth shining upon it!⁴³

Upon entering, the Holy Spirit set a new goal for the relationship.⁴⁴ Helen and Bill had set the goal of demonstrating Bill's better way, yet the Holy Spirit used this opportunity to set a much deeper goal, the goal of holiness,⁴⁵ the goal of God.⁴⁶ He not only *set* the goal; at the same moment, He *accomplished* it. He carried the relationship to the end of the journey, to a place of perfect holiness.

Your relationship with your brother has been uprooted from the world of shadows, and its unholy purpose has been safely brought through the barriers of guilt, washed with forgiveness, and set shining and firmly rooted in the world of light.⁴⁷

On a conscious level, of course, the relationship was much the same. But on an unconscious level, it had already achieved its lofty goal. It was past the finish line. "From there," says the Course, "it calls to you to follow the course it took."⁴⁸ In other words, it was beckoning them to reach the place that, on a deeper level, they had already attained.

In addition to healing their relationship, the Holy Spirit also healed their minds. Before, their minds had been dominated by the belief in sin, the lens which showed them a dark and dangerous world. This belief was like an ancient tree which sent thick roots deep into their minds. Now, this belief had been uprooted,⁴⁹ and floated about aimlessly like a tiny feather.⁵⁰ In its place, the Holy Spirit planted Christ's vision, the goal of the Course.

You who were sightless have been given vision, and you can see. Look not for what has been removed [the belief in sin], but for the glory that has been restored for you to see.⁵¹

This vision was not yet conscious, but it was not entirely submerged, either. Its light could be seen gleaming beneath the surface. For this reason, the Course declared, "You are no longer wholly insane."⁵²

Finally, the Holy Spirit gave Helen and Bill their function. "The holy light that brought you and him together must extend, as you accepted it."⁵³ Without realizing it, they had signed on as workers in the Holy Spirit's global Peace Corps. They would be given a special function, which they would carry out jointly, and through which, they were promised, "thousands will rise to Heaven with you."⁵⁴ It is not hard to see the lives touched by *A Course in Miracles* as the fulfillment of this promise.

All in all, the Course treats this event as the fulcrum on which their whole journey turned. Up until that point, they were each on a lonely trek through a parched and unforgiving desert, blinded and choking in the desert's dust. Yet in that moment, everything changed. "You groped but feebly in the dust and found your brother's hand."⁵⁵ They stepped out of separation and found each other. And by taking the other's hand, they unwittingly invited the Holy Spirit into their lives. He responded and planted in their relationship the seeds of a new future. He placed in them the perfect relationship which they would gradually move into. He placed in them the vision of Christ which they would slowly make their own. And He placed in them the special function through which they would "spread joy to thousands on thousands who believe that love is fear, not happiness."⁵⁶ It was as if the Christ child had been reborn in their relationship,⁵⁷ and from now on their lives would be a story of this child growing up, beginning his ministry, performing his miracles, and saving the world.

The Course captured this entire process in three succinct words: "Salvation has come."⁵⁸

Helen and Bill's joining as an example of key Course concepts

There is still another angle from which to appreciate the significance of this event. This angle is actually what prompted this article. Over time I have noticed that Helen and Bill's joining is a perfect example of many important Course concepts. It probably wouldn't surprise us if it exemplified a particular key idea in the Course. What is so remarkable is that somehow this single experience simultaneously exemplifies a whole roster of the Course's most central concepts. To narrow down this list (which could get rather long), I've chosen only those key Course concepts that are also *events* or *developments* which the Course wants to see happen in our lives. I'll list those now, and describe each one in such a way that you can easily see how it matches Helen and Bill's experience.

Holy instant

The holy instant is, as it is called early in the Text, an "out-of-pattern time interval."⁵⁹ We generally spend our lives locked into certain patterns, which makes each interval of time just another repetition of the same old thing. Yet occasionally, something inside shifts. We step out of those stifling patterns and stumble into a broader dimension. We experience an "out-of-pat-

tern time interval”—a holy instant. In that instant, something new enters, and that newness becomes the basis for a new future.

It is not hard to see how this parallels Helen and Bill’s experience, which is why the Course calls their experience a holy instant no less than eight times.⁶⁰

The miracle

The miracle, whether in the Bible or in the Course, is about divine deliverance from our earthly prisons, from which we felt no hope of escape. Into this picture, the Course simply adds that the heart of this deliverance is a shift in our perception. For our prison cells are made of false perception, and true perception is what sets us free. A little known fact is that the Course usually depicts this changed perception as passing back and forth between people. It first enters the mind of one and is then extended to another, who will often return it in the form of gratitude. As the Course says, “Miracles...are genuinely interpersonal.”⁶¹

Seen in this light, Helen and Bill’s joining is a classic miracle. First, Bill’s perception shifted. He suddenly saw Helen and their entire situation in a different light. This changed perception transferred to Helen, who accepted it and returned it to Bill. And this joint shift in perception set them free—either temporarily or permanently—from a number of prisons: the prison of their past resentments, of their broken relationships, of their broken department, and of a life without purpose.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is the central teaching in the Course, and we have already noted that Helen and Bill’s joining was an instance of forgiveness. How could they genuinely unite in this new venture without laying aside their past resentments? Twice the Course refers to this event as an act of forgiveness.⁶²

The holy encounter

A holy encounter is essentially a joint holy instant, in which two people step hand-in-hand out of the usual patterns and experience a *shared* “out-of-pattern time interval.” It starts with one person seeing past separate interests, seeing the other not as a stranger or competitor or attacker, but as his “ancient Friend.”⁶³ He then reaches out with this new perception, and (if it is a holy encounter) the other person reaches back. Salvation is given, and then returned, and then mutually shared. And in the sharing of it, the two enter into a timeless moment together. “The room becomes a temple, and the street a stream of stars that brushes lightly past all sickly dreams.”⁶⁴ According to the Course, everyone who meets does so because the Holy Spirit sees in them the potential for a holy encounter. He therefore, like a divine matchmaker, intentionally places them together in the hopes that they will actualize that potential.

Although the term is seldom used, the Course grants enormous significance to the concept of the holy encounter, saying that it is “holy encounters in which salvation can be found.”⁶⁵ A couple of years ago I did a study which concluded that the holy encounter is actually the “core unit of salvation” in the Course.

It goes without saying that Helen and Bill’s joining was the archetypal holy encounter.

The holy relationship

The Course’s descriptions of the holy relationship sketch an entire story. This story begins with a special relationship, which is held together by each person’s fantasy that the other can make him or her feel really special. The logic of this fantasy plays out in a predictable pattern, in which the initial excitement fades and is replaced by increasing resentment. Yet anywhere along this sad tale something can enter which changes everything. A miraculous moment comes in which the two transcend their differences and join in a truly common goal. In that moment, all the rules for their relationship change. An unseen Presence enters and begins to guide them to the goal of holiness, a state in which the two partners relate to each other as Sons of God, not as egos. This Presence also guides them into their joint special function, in which they extend to the world the holiness that has blessed their relationship.

This story told by the Course does not just resemble Helen and Bill’s relationship; when the Course tells this story (in Chapters 17-22 in the Text) it is speaking directly *about* their relationship. It is unfortunate that they did not make it to the later stages of the holy relationship, but they did provide us with an exceptionally clear example of the moment when a special relationship changes over to a holy one.

The special function

We all begin life looking out for number one. Our lives are generally a quest to find our special place in the social hierarchy, and so regardless of how other-oriented we seem to be, we are really on a solitary search for personal specialness. Yet a person can change that with one deliberate choice in which he does “not see his interests as apart from someone else’s....”

Once he has done that, his road is established and his direction is sure...He has entered an agreement with God even if he does not yet believe in Him. He has become a bringer of salvation. He has become a teacher of God.⁶⁶

The Holy Spirit will then assign this new teacher of God his own special place, not in human society, but in God's plan for salvation. This place will draw upon his special abilities, his greatest strengths, enabling him to potentially spread light to "thousands on thousands."⁶⁷

In reading this account, it is hard not to think about Helen and Bill, who began with a search to find their special place on the professional ladder, who then made that deliberate choice to see their interests as the same, who thereby entered an agreement with God while not believing in Him, who assumed their place in the plan for salvation, and whose special abilities (particularly, Helen's ability to hear Jesus' voice) were used to reach thousands on thousands.

The social vision of ACIM

Unlike the other categories, this one is not a Course term, but it does represent a very important pattern in the Course. A few years ago, I realized there was a series of images, scattered throughout the Course, which depict what might be called ideal social situations. These images are different renderings of a single pattern. So I wrote an article about them, trying to capture this pattern, which is entitled "The Social Vision of *A Course in Miracles*" (see www.circleofa.com/articles/social_vision.html).

In this pattern, the world is a desert, devoid not of water, but of life-sustaining love, a desert scorched by the searing rays of hate. Yet in some corner of this desert something extraordinary happens. Two people renounce the hate. They forgive each other and the gap between them vanishes. This single event has incredible repercussions. It invites divine Guests (God and Christ) to come and surround them. The presence of these Guests causes the ground on which they stand to become holy ground. And out of this ground springs a little garden, an oasis in the desert. Those who wander in the desert are then invited into this garden, where they find rejuvenation and healing. When they leave, they carry its essence with them and plant new gardens elsewhere, so that what began with just two people gradually transforms the entire desert into a garden of love.

This story can easily be seen as a metaphorical depiction of what happened with Bill and Helen. The match is especially good when you think of their department, which started out as a desert of hate and, because of their joining, was eventually transformed into something much more like a garden.

How can a single experience all at once exemplify so many core ideas from the Course? How can a single event typify so many of the main events and developments the Course wants to see happen in our lives? This is all the more remarkable when you observe that each of the above items is actually its own complex timeline with its own particular account of past, present, and future. How can one experience fit them all? How can one event be the intersection of so many central threads of *A Course in Miracles*? We can only assume that this experience is indeed a window onto the heart and soul of the Course.

The example of what this path is about

A Course in Miracles is so unwieldy, so complex and so abstract, that we all struggle to boil it down to some simple essence. What is its core idea, we wonder? What is the main thing it wants us to do? What does it look like to actually live it? Somewhere in the back of our minds, I suspect, we are mulling over these questions continually, like a computer processing an extremely complex problem.

That has certainly been true in my own case. For over twenty years now I have incessantly tried to boil the Course down. I find myself captivated every week or two by some new theme, and as I wander from theme to theme, I constantly wonder how it all comes together. I have written pieces on the "heart of the Course" and the "core unit" of the Course. I have tried out at least a dozen ways to summarize the whole system. I love the complexity of the Course, but in the living of it I crave simplicity. I love the abstractness, but I also need something concrete.

Helen and Bill's joining is the Course's own answer to our need for a simple, concrete heart to this path. Over and over, the Course spotlights this experience as *the* example of what this path is all about. We have seen four different ways in which it does this spotlighting:

1. This experience was the birthplace of the Course, the spark that brought the Course into being. This suggests an essential connection between what this experience was about and what the Course is about.
2. Unlike other experiences Helen had, this one is mentioned directly by the Course—over one hundred times.
3. Those references assign the experience immense significance. They essentially point to it and say, "This is salvation."
4. The experience is a classic example of some of the most important ideas in the Course, a perfect illustration of the main events and developments the Course wants to see happen in our lives.

This is it. If we are looking for the place where it all comes together, if we are asking for the central thing the Course wants us to do, if we wonder what it really looks like to live the Course, *this is it*.

Yes, the Course's central teaching is forgiveness, but what it really aims for are instances in which forgiveness is extended to another and then returned, thus sparking a moment of joining which lifts both people into a shared holy instant, a holy encounter. This encounter welcomes in the Holy Spirit, Who erases their painful past and opens up a new future, a future in which the ripples from this moment keep spreading outward, touching countless lives. Such moments may be life-changing or they may be quieter and less dramatic. Yet they are the main thing the Course wants to see happen with us. They are what it looks like to live the Course.

Helen and Bill's experience, then, is the lens through which we should view the Course. After all, this is the visual illustration the Course places on its own pages. This, then, should be the concrete image we staple to its abstract system. If we do that, I suspect we will find ourselves at least somewhat reimagining the Course. There is so much of the interpersonal here: There is Helen and Bill having an actual joining in an actual room, after which they actually go about healing their personal and professional relationships. There is so much of the Holy Spirit working in the world here: He is present throughout the story, in sticking Helen and Bill together initially and in dictating the Course to them once they join. All in all, there is just so much action and interaction in the world, so much concrete, this-world change. Is that how we think of the Course now?

Maybe so, but I don't think that this is how *most* students think of the Course. There are no polls about how students view it, but my impression is that two attitudes powerfully define the Course for many, if not most, students.

First, there's *individualism*, which says it's all about my mind and my inner states. The Course is only about me finding peace in the midst of life's difficulties, about me exchanging my depressed and fearful inner states for peaceful and blissful inner states. All that matters is what goes on in my mind. The only thing I can (and should) do for others is change my mind. I don't have to actually help them; I just need to see them differently and let them help themselves.

Second, there's the *metaphysics*, which says that this world is not real. I shouldn't try to change anything out there, because there is no "out there." I therefore shouldn't see acting in the world as part of following the Course. After all, the Holy Spirit doesn't act in the world, so why should I? Doesn't the book say "I need do nothing"?

Some students carry one orientation and not the other, but the two often and very easily converge: It's only about my peace because there is no world out there.

Now, it is true that the Course puts intense focus on our minds. Yet it wants our change of perception to transform us into being saviors of the world:

Those who would let illusions be lifted from their minds are this world's saviors, walking the world with their Redeemer, and carrying His message of hope and freedom and release from suffering to everyone who needs a miracle to save him.⁶⁸

And yes, it is true that the Course teaches that the world is unreal, but the Course also repeatedly says that "our true purpose is to save the world."⁶⁹ In the end, the metaphysics is supposed to be a *support* for the changes the Course wants to make in us and through us. The metaphysics is meant to be a *means*, not an end in itself. Understanding the metaphysics *is* important, but only because it helps us enter into those "holy encounters in which salvation can be found."⁷⁰

I think that perhaps it is easier to focus on just finding peace for ourselves. I think that perhaps it is more attractive to pursue our own private realization of nondual reality. We read stories about solitary mystics who, in a profound meditation, wake up to their primordial nature, and we think "I want that." After all, isn't that what the Course is about?

As we've seen, that's *not* what the Course is about. Helen had mystical experiences, and while Jesus placed genuine importance in them, there is not a single mention of them in the Course, let alone a *hundred*. In a famous passage in "I Need Do Nothing," the Course distinguishes itself from those paths which emphasize "long periods of meditation"⁷¹ (even while saying that "all such attempts will ultimately succeed"⁷²). After discussing them, the Course then presents its own unique way to God:

Your way will be different, not in purpose but in means....One instant spent together restores the universe to both of you.⁷³

The section is all about the holy instant⁷⁴ (though usually calling it "an instant"⁷⁵ or "one instant"⁷⁶), and so "one instant spent together" means "one *holy* instant spent together." It is talking about a *joint* holy instant, a holy encounter, and saying precisely what I've been saying: *This* is the Course's distinctive way to God.

Then the section—which originally came as personal counsel for Helen—subtly alludes to her and Bill's act of coming together:

Time has been saved for you because you [Helen] and your brother [Bill] are together. This is the special means

this course is using to save you time.⁷⁷

This is an extremely important passage. Like the previous one, it is saying the same thing that I have been saying. First, it refers to Helen and Bill's joining and then it says, "This is the special means this course is using to save you time." In these two passages, then, we have a fifth way in which the Course spotlights their joining as a window onto the heart of its path. The first four, however, were more indirect. Here, the Course just comes right out and says it.

Then come these lines:

You are not making use of the course if you insist on using means which have served others well, neglecting what was made for you. Save time for me by only this one preparation, and practice doing nothing else.⁷⁸

These are strong words. We are not making use of the Course if we are pursuing our solitary awakening through interior experiences. We are not making use of the Course if our path is only about our own peace because the world is unreal. These means have served others well, but they are not *our* means. The Course is taking us down a different path. It is a challenging path. It is easy to become "spiritual" and yet undergo no real change in how we relate to other people. In contrast, the Course's way is focused like a laser beam on that moment in which we see another so differently that she cannot help but respond, and together we enter into a holy instant which will change our lives and our world—perhaps a little, perhaps a lot.

So let us think about our versions of Helen and Bill's Psychology Department and our versions of Helen and Bill's relationship. We all have them—those places in our lives where we and the others involved seem hopelessly stuck. In those places, we may be so locked into negative patterns that there appears to be no way out. Yet, just like Helen and Bill, we were placed in these situations because the Holy Spirit saw in each person the potential for a holy encounter, one that would change everything. Let us do all that we can to muster the willingness to come to this encounter. Let us practice entering into it and "practice doing nothing else." For this is the special means this course is using to save us time. This is *our* way home.



1. What follows is a condensation of the story told in Ken Wapnick's *Absence from Felicity: The Story of Helen Schucman and Her Scribbling of 'A Course in Miracles'* (Roscoe, NY: Foundation for "A Course in Miracles," 1991), pp. 83-95.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.
11. W-pI.21.Heading; W-pI.28.Heading.
12. W-pI.161.1:1.
13. T-17.III.1:1.
14. W-pI.181.2:5.
15. This came as part of a correction for what is now miracle principle #19, which was supposed to read "cooperation depends on miracles" not "miracles...depend on cooperation," as it reads now.
16. T-7.I.4:1.
17. *Absence from Felicity*, pp. 94-95.
18. I counted a "mention" as either a sentence that clearly refers to their joining, or a series of sentences in which every one of the sentences refers to it.
19. T-17.V.11:1.
20. T-18.III.4:1.
21. T-18.VIII.12:1.

22. T-17.VIII.4:1, 6:7; T-18.III.6:7.
23. T-19.IV(A).5:7.
24. T-19.IV(C).1:2.
25. *Absence from Felicity*, p. 49.
26. T-18.III.4:5.
27. T-19.IV(C).10:7; T-20.II.9:2.
28. T-17.V.11:1; T-18.VIII.13:3; T-19.IV(A).7:1.
29. T-18.III.4:1-2; T-18.III.6:6-7; T-19.IV(B).7:2; T-20.I.4:3.
30. T-18.V.4:5; T-19.IV(A).4:10; T-19.IV(C).2:13; T-20.II.5:3; T-21.IV.4:5; T-21.IV.5:4.
31. T-17.V.9:6.
32. T-18.I.11:5; T-18.II.9:3; T-18.III.3:1.
33. T-22.I.9:8.
34. T-18.V.4:5.
35. T-21.IV.4:5-6.
36. T-19.IV.2:5; T-19.IV(A).7:3; T-19.IV(C).1:1; T-17.V.11:2.
37. T-19.IV(B).7:2; T-18.III.4:1-2; T-18.III.5:5; T-20.I.4:3.
38. T-19.IV(B).7:2; T-18.I.11:3; T-18.III.3:2.
39. T-18.I.11:1; T-18.II.9:3; T-21.IV.7:6.
40. T-18.III.3:1; T-22.I.10:5; T-18.II.9:3.
41. T-18.I.11:2; T-22.I.10:7; T-18.VIII.12:1-2.
42. T-19.IV.1:6.
43. T-18.I.11:2-4.
44. T-17.V.6:1, 7-8; T-17.VII.4:2; T-17.VII.4:4; T-17.VII.5:1; T-17.VII.9:5; T-18.I.1:2; T-18.II.7:4; T-20.VII.2:2; T-20.VIII.2:6; T-24.I.8:8-9; T-26.VIII.6:3; T-26.X.5:3.
45. T-17.VII.4:2; T-24.I.8:9.
46. T-17.V.9:6.
47. T-18.IX.13:1.
48. T-18.IX.13:2.
49. T-19.III.8:5.
50. T-19.IV(A).7:4-8:1.
51. T-19.III.10:6-7.
52. T-17.VII.10:2.
53. T-18.I.13:6.
54. T-18.V.3:1.
55. T-20.III.9:3.
56. T-18.V.5:5.
57. T-19.IV(C).10:7-8; T-22.I.7:2-3, 8:7.
58. M-3.2:8.
59. T-1.I.47:2; T-2.V(A).11:2.
60. T-17.V.10:2, 11:10, 12:5, 13:1, 15:1; T-18.IX.13:3; T-19.III.10:4; T-19.IV(D).9:6.
61. T-1.II.1:4.
62. T-19.IV(C).10:7; T-20.II.9:2.
63. T-20.I.4:5.
64. P-2.VII.8:4.
65. T-13.IV.7:7.

66. M-1.1:2-3, 6-8.
67. T-18.V.5:5.
68. T-22.IV.6:5.
69. W-pI.153.8:2.
70. T-13.IV.7:7.
71. T-18.VII.4:9.
72. T-18.VII.4:10.
73. T-18.VII.5:1, 3; wording and emphasis from original dictation.
74. T-18.VII.4:1.
75. T-18.VII.2:3, 4:1.
76. T-18.VII.6:8.
77. T-18.VII.6:3-4.
78. T-18.VII.6:5-6.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Robert,

Thank you so much for this clear and comprehensible explanation of the editing of the course [“The Earlier Versions and the Editing of *A Course in Miracles*,” *A Better Way* #47]. Having read some of the Urtext pages after the standard version, and currently reading the HLC version, I appreciated your in-depth research into the changes and how they might have occurred. Not only does your explanation make sense, it also rings true from all that I have read and heard about Helen, Bill and Ken.

Some of the things you have explained also shed more light for me on what the Course actually teaches—like you I appreciated the specifics of the Urtext and, being a psychologist, would really benefit from the references to psychologists. I think much of psychology that may have been unknown to the general public during the 1960s has subsequently become more common knowledge, and that you are correct in assuming that many non-psychologists would understand the references and that they would help to clarify the true teachings.

For your comments on the mutuality expressed in the original Course, I want to especially thank you, as one of my personal difficulties with the Course has been the way some Course students seemingly set themselves above non-students. The language of the standard version may be the real culprit in that perception on my part.

I had the opportunity to take part in a workshop you gave in Edmonton, Alberta and was also very happy to hear you talk of working on a program of social action for Course students. You mention the physical action aspect of the Course in this article as well, and I have always felt that it is an important aspect that few Course students seem to acknowledge. Thank you Robert.

Marilyn Wiens

Via e-mail

CIRCLE NEWS

CIRCLE OFFICE MANAGER NEEDED

The Circle of Atonement has an opening for an Office Manager, for approximately thirty hours a week. Computer skills are essential, and experience in a supervisory role is preferred. If you are interested, please send your resume via e-mail to Nicola Harvey at nicola@circleofa.com.

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TESTIMONIALS NEEDED FOR A COURSE GLOSSARY AND BRINGING THE COURSE TO LIFE

We are reprinting two of our books and are in need of testimonials from those who have benefited from them. These books are *A Course Glossary* (to which we are adding twenty-seven new definitions) and *Bringing the Course to Life* (which we are reprinting with a new cover and layout).

Although many people have told us they intend to respond, we've actually had very few responses so far. **Remember, if we use your testimonial on or in the book, you will receive a free copy of the new version.** Send your testimonials to info@circleofa.com with "BOOK TESTIMONIAL" in the header.

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WRITE AN ONLINE REVIEW OF A CIRCLE BOOK YOU ENJOYED

If you have really enjoyed a particular Circle book, please consider writing an online review to share your enthusiasm for this book with others. Online reviews of our books are great for the Circle, and they are very easy to do. Just go to the major bookselling websites like Amazon (www.amazon.com), Barnes & Noble (www.bn.com), or Borders (www.borders.com), and follow their instructions for writing and posting a review. The effort involved is little but the benefits to the Circle are enormous.

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JON MUNDY SPEAKS AT THE CIRCLE ON JANUARY 12

We had a wonderful visit from Jon Mundy on January 12. (Jon is in the middle of the photograph, flanked by Robert Perry on his right and Greg Mackie on his left.) Jon is a longtime Course teacher, publisher of *Miracles* magazine, and author of *Awaken to Your Own Call*, *The Ten Laws of Happiness*, and his recent autobiography, *Missouri Mystic*. On introducing him, Robert explained that Jon had been the catalyst for Helen to complete the scribing of the *Psychotherapy* supplement.

Our local students gathered to hear Jon speak on mysticism and the Course. He paralleled the characteristics of the mystical experience—as defined by William James in the classic *Varieties of Religious Experience*—with the teachings of the Course.

Then, Jon left the room and his alter ego—Swami Baba Ji Whiz—appeared. Baba fielded questions from the audience with answers that had the crowd in tears of laughter. He answered dozens of such questions before retreating back into the mystical silence from whence he came.



Jon Mundy with Robert Perry and Greg Mackie

How to Enter Paradise Today

by Allen Watson

In Chapter 20 of the Text, there is a reference to a story from the Bible that can easily be missed, unless you are very familiar with the Bible. Yet when you make the connection between the Bible and the Course, both the Course passage and the Bible story come alive with a powerful message that neither one quite has by itself.

The passage in the Text is contained toward the end of Chapter 20, Section III, “Sin as an Adjustment.” Before I bring in the Bible story, I want to summarize the first part of this section. It teaches us that the way our usual perception works, we do not see the truth. We do not recognize our own holiness, and therefore do not recognize it in the world around us.

You make the world and then adjust to it, and it to you. Nor is there any difference between yourself and it in your perception, which made them both. (T-20.III.3:6–7)

Instead of looking out from the perception of our own holiness (T-1.III.6:7) and seeing Christ everywhere (despite all of his “distressing disguises,” as Mother Teresa called them), we perceive our own guilt and thus see guilt everywhere. We “look out in sorrow from what is sad within, and see the sadness there” (T-20.III.4:7). We judge those around us; we see them as sinners.

Jesus tells us that if we don’t like the world we see, full of judgment, fear, murder, and attack, we need to realize that *we made it up!* (T-20.III.4:3). It is a picture of the way we see ourselves, “the outside picture of an inward condition” (T-21.In.1:5). “The world you see is but a judgment on yourself. It is not there at all” (T-20.III.5:2–3). As one student expressed it recently in a study group, the world is a giant biofeedback device. Our perception of it reveals the state of our minds.

The section goes on to talk about those with holy minds, who have entered a holy relationship.

The world the holy see is beautiful because they see their innocence in it. They did not tell it what it was; they did not make adjustments to fit their orders. They gently questioned it and whispered, “What are you?” (T-20.III.6:3–5)

By “tell it what it was” the Course is referring to our projection of our guilt onto the world. And the implication here is that if we, without preconception and projection, ask the world what it is or ask our brother what he is, the answer will be, “Innocent! The holy Son of God.” If we ask our ego or another’s ego what we are, the ego, which is “the only thing in all the universe that does not know” what we are (T-20.III.7:6), will answer, “Guilty!” The lesson we must learn is to *not* ask the ego, “How shall I look upon the Son of God?”

Jesus then begins to speak about prisoners (T-20.III.9). He compares you to a prisoner who has been locked away in darkness, in solitary confinement. After years of being totally alone, you heard another voice; you recognized that someone else was near. Cautiously, hardly daring to hope, you felt about in the darkness and suddenly, with shock, you felt another hand grip yours! Tears of joy welled up in your eyes, but also there was fear and mistrust in your heart. *Who is this person whose hand I have taken?* Jesus urges you:

Strengthen your hold and raise your eyes unto your strong companion, in whom the meaning of your freedom lies. He seemed to be crucified beside you. And yet his holiness remained untouched and perfect, and with him beside you, you shall this day enter with him to Paradise, and know the peace of God. (T-20.III.9:4–6)

The Bible Story

Do you catch the reference to the Bible there? Can you identify the biblical story that is being referred to? It is a reference to a story from the Gospel of Luke, concerning events that took place during the crucifixion of Jesus. Quoting from the New American Standard Bible:

When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves. And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, “He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One.” The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, and saying, “If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!” Now there was also an inscription above Him, “THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, “Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!” But the other answered, and rebuking him said, “Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” And he was saying, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” And He said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.”

(Lk 23:33–43)

The two criminals were crucified with Jesus, one on either side. They represent the ego’s way of seeing the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit’s way.

Consider, then, who it is that Jesus calls “your strong companion” who “seemed to be crucified beside you.” It must refer to your brother or sister, your partner in a holy relationship, whose hand you have found while groping about in the darkness. “Raise your eyes,” says Jesus, and look upon him (or her). Who *is* this person who seems to be in the same sad shape you are in—crucified beside you?

Imagine yourself as one of those criminals. The first one looked at Jesus, heard the soldiers mocking him and the rulers sneering at him, and saw him as he saw himself: a criminal. Helpless. A victim of the justice system. So far from being someone who could save anyone else that he could not even save himself. So he hurled abuse at Jesus. He looked at him and was unable to see the truth about him; the distressing disguise was all he could see because he was asking his ego for the answer.

The second criminal, however, was not fooled. He looked and saw the truth: “This man has done nothing wrong.” He looked at the battered body, the bleeding wounds, and despite all of it, he saw the holy Son of God. He saw someone who could save him from hell.

This is not a story meant to teach us that we cannot be saved from eternal damnation unless we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior, or as the only begotten Son of God. It is a story, as Jesus interprets it here in the Course, that tells us that if we can accept *our miserable, pathetic brother* as the Christ, the innocent Son of God who “has done nothing wrong,” the strong companion who is our savior, we will that very day enter Paradise; we will be saved from our present hell. This isn’t about dying and going to Heaven, it is about Heaven here and now, attained through forgiveness of that person right next to you. Yes, *that* person.

Raise your eyes and look upon that person beside you. He or she *seems* to be crucified. He or she seems to be a guilty sinner under judgment. But if you are willing to be shown a different picture by the Holy Spirit, you can see past that ghastly picture to the truth: “his holiness [has] remained untouched and perfect” (T-20.III.9:6).

And *this*—seeing our brother or sister as the holy, innocent child of God—is the way *you* will enter Paradise. This is why “relationships are [your] salvation” (T-20.VI.11:9), why “the ark of peace is entered two by two” (T-20.IV.6:5), why “you cannot enter God’s Presence...alone” (T-11.III.7:8).

Until we are willing to see our brother as sinless, our judgment on ourselves will also continue. Our judgment on our brother *is* our judgment on ourselves, the outside picture of that inner judgment. We must release others to be released ourselves:

Release from guilt as you would be released. There is no other way to look within and see the light of love, shining as steadily and as surely as God Himself has always loved His Son. (T-13.X.10:1–2)