

# A Better Way

A NEWSLETTER FOR STUDENTS OF A COURSE IN MIRACLES / THE CIRCLE OF ATONEMENT / APRIL 2005 / ISSUE 50

## Do You Believe in Miracles?

### The Holy Encounter between Ashley Smith and Brian Nichols

by Greg Mackie

On March 11, 2005, Brian Nichols was being escorted to a courthouse in Atlanta, Georgia to stand trial for rape. He stole a gun from the deputy taking him to the courtroom and killed the presiding judge, a court reporter, and a sheriff's deputy before stealing a car and escaping. While on the run, he killed one more person, an FBI agent. Late that night, he took a woman named Ashley Smith hostage.

The encounter that followed between Ashley Smith and Brian Nichols was, I believe, a powerful example of what the Course calls a holy encounter: an encounter between two people in which they exchange salvation and join through seeing Christ in one another. I'd like to look at that encounter now from the perspective of the Course, with an eye to applying its lessons to our own lives. The following is a brief summary of what happened between them, based on Ashley Smith's first-person account. To illustrate how this encounter is a holy encounter, I've broken it down into four elements.

#### 1. Ashley and Brian have an encounter that, on the face of it, is entirely random and self-serving

The encounter begins when Ashley, returning from a trip to the store for cigarettes at two in the morning, is taken hostage by the fugitive Brian in the parking lot of her apartment complex. He forces her into her apartment at gunpoint, ties her up, and puts her in the bathroom. He says that if she doesn't cooperate with him fully, "I'm going to have to kill you and probably myself and lots of other people. And I don't want that."

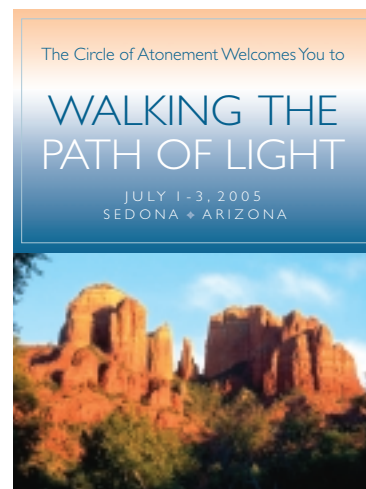
As extreme as this situation is, in content it really isn't that different from most of our encounters. We normally think of our encounters as either random or set up by ourselves for our own purposes. "You perceive the world and everything in it as meaningful in terms of ego goals" (W-pI.25.2:1). In other words: What's in it for me? Here, Brian spots Ashley, who just happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. He takes her hostage; his goal is to escape the law. Her goal initially is just to survive so she can see her young daughter again.

#### 2. Ashley, though, chooses to see it as a holy encounter in which she can serve Brian

At this point, Brian looks like a monster. Ashley has every reason to fear for her life and no earthly reason to feel anything but hatred toward the man who has taken her hostage. Indeed, she *does* fear for her life. But in the midst of terror, she chooses not to hate. She chooses a better way.

She had been reading the bestselling book *The Purpose-Driven Life*, by Rick Warren, which emphasizes the theme that God has a purpose for everything that happens in our lives. (This is a very conservative Christian book, but theological differences needn't blind us to the

*Continued on page 3*



Register now for Path of Light retreat. See page 6

## Contents

Do You Believe in Miracles? The Holy Encounter between Ashley Smith and Brian Nichols by Greg Mackie . . . . .	1
Circle Events . . . . .	2
Special Issue: The Holy Encounter . . . . .	3
Fejzić and His Cow by Robert Perry . . . . .	7
Your Name Is Brother by Greg Mackie . . . . .	8

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Our financial policy is based on a line from *Psychotherapy* (a Course supplement): "One rule should always be observed: No one should be turned away because he cannot pay" (P-3.III.6:1). Therefore, if you would like any of our materials or services and cannot afford them, simply let us know, and give whatever you are able to.

The Circle is supported entirely by your purchases and gifts, and we ask you to look within to see if you might be led to support our vision financially with a donation above the list price of materials (any donations are tax deductible). We encourage you to give not in payment for goods received, but in support of our work and outreach.

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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.

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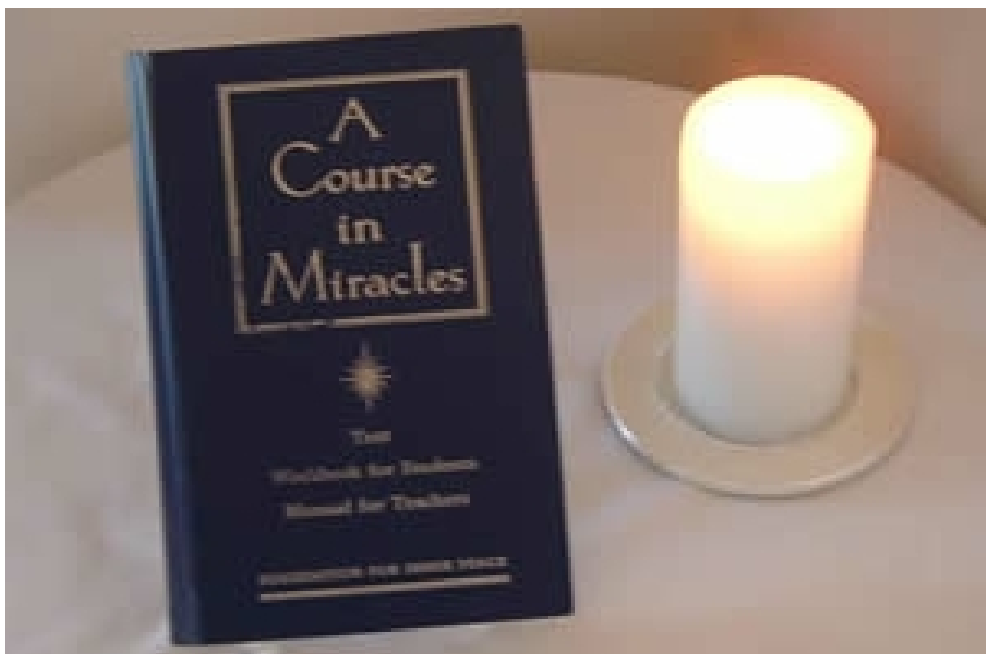
#### *Weekly Morning Class*

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*Contact Allen Watson*  
[allen@circleofa.com](mailto:allen@circleofa.com) - (503) 284-3619

## OTHER EVENTS

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*Information: [www.iammiracle.org](http://www.iammiracle.org)*  
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[sueborg@xmission.com](mailto:sueborg@xmission.com) - (801) 261-2227

*Sedona, Arizona*  
**"Walking the Path of Light"**  
With Robert Perry  
July 1-3, 2005  
*Information: See ad on Page 6 of this newsletter*



genuine wisdom such books can contain.) Chapter 33—the very chapter Smith had been reading earlier that day, a part of which she ends up reading to Brian—begins by saying, “We serve God by serving others.” It goes on to say that every single human encounter gives us a priceless opportunity to serve: “You may get only one chance to serve that person, so take advantage of that moment.”

In the midst of a horrifying ordeal with her life on the line, Smith sees her chance to serve Brian and takes it. She starts by choosing to see him in a new way; as a *Time* article by Andrew Sullivan puts it, “She says she saw him not as a monster but as a human being.” She sees him as a person who has worth and needs help. In her words, “He needed hope for his life”—quite a thing to say about someone who has pointed a gun at you and tied you up. Relating to him as a human being, she works to earn his trust by telling him the story of her difficult life, and listening to him tell his story. “He got to know me. I got to know him.” She empathizes with him.

I think there is something very Course-like in this. Though the Course cautions against “false empathy” (empathizing with another’s weakness), it does stress the recognition that your brother’s needs and yours are the same: “He asks for what you want, and needs the same as you” (T-31.II.10:3). Though the need “takes, perhaps, a different form in him” (T-31.II.10:4)—even the desperate, distorted form of taking someone hostage—you and your brother have the same basic need: in essence, love. Seeing your common need and answering your brother’s call for love, as Ashley does, helps you recognize that “you have come with but one purpose: that you learn you love your brother with a brother’s love” (T-31.II.10:5).

But ultimately, Ashley sees far more in Brian than simply a desperate person in need. She sees him as a brother in Christ, a precious child of God who has come to her not at random but for a divine purpose, a person who has been saved by miraculous means and has a special function in God’s plan for salvation. She says to him:

Do you believe in miracles? Because if you don’t believe in miracles—you are here for a reason. You’re here in my apartment for some reason. You got out of that courthouse with police everywhere, and you don’t think that’s a miracle? You don’t think you’re supposed to be sitting here right in front of me listening to me tell you, you know, your reason here?

You know, your miracle could be that you need to—you need to be caught for this. You need to go to prison and you need to share the word of God with them, with all the prisoners there.

## Special Issue: The Holy Encounter

When you meet anyone, remember it is a holy encounter. As you see him you will see yourself. As you treat him you will treat yourself. As you think of him you will think of yourself. Never forget this, for in him you will find yourself or lose yourself. Whenever two Sons of God meet, they are given another chance at salvation. Do not leave anyone without giving salvation to him and receiving it yourself. (T-8.III.4:1-7)

In the last issue of *A Better Way* (Issue #49), Robert Perry wrote about how the holy encounter between Helen and Bill—the moment in which they joined to seek a “better way” to deal with their interpersonal conflicts—is a window onto the heart of *A Course in Miracles*. It is the lens through which we should view the Course’s path, the prime example of what Jesus wants us to do. In keeping with this theme, we have decided to devote this issue to the holy encounter.

What is a holy encounter? Here is Robert’s definition of “holy encounter” from his Course glossary:

An encounter between two people in which salvation is given and returned and mutually shared. The Course teaches that such encounters are the most powerful catalysts for our awakening, for it is in these that “salvation can be found” (T-13.IV.7:7). It also teaches that the Holy Spirit arranges all human encounters, making sure that each one contains the potential for being a holy encounter (see M-3.2). The term itself is seldom used (see T-8.III, T-13.IV, P-2.1.4), but the concept occurs throughout the Course (see for instance, M-3.2, P-3.III.6, W-pll.315.1, W-pl.95.15, P-2.VII.8).

The three articles in this newsletter are all about specific holy encounters. It is our hope that they will not only inspire you, but will also help you have holy encounters with the people in your life. Enjoy!

What strikes me most about this encounter is that Ashley’s loving perception of Brian is expressed in the form of ordinary human kindness. To me, that is the central feature of this story. She gains his trust simply by being kind to him. She shares her life with him and lends a compassionate ear as he shares his life with her, just as a good friend would. She shares her faith in God with him and encourages him by telling him that he is a child of God with an important role in the divine plan. She cooperates with him fully, but does even more than that: she demonstrates Jesus’ “go the extra mile” teaching in the gospels by giving him *more* than he asks for. In the morning, she cooks him a delicious pancake breakfast. (He had untied her earlier.)

The Course contains passages that are snapshots of what a holy encounter might look like, and they too depict ordinary human kindness. For instance, in the Manual, the examples given are two strangers in an elevator smiling at one another, an adult not scolding a child who runs into him, and two students walking home together and becoming friends (M-3.2). Even though the content of these encounters (if the two people truly join) is nothing less than the salvation of the world, the form often looks very mundane.

### *3. Through this vision, Ashley saves Brian*

Early in the encounter, it is clear that deep down, Brian himself thinks he is a monster. Imagine how you would really feel about yourself if you had done what he did. Would you not feel like a worm who deserves to die? Indeed, Brian speaks of killing himself. Later on, he says to Ashley, “Look at me, look at my eyes. I am already dead.” He even asks her to shoot him. She responds by saying, “I don’t want anyone else to die, not even you.”

But as the encounter progresses, Ashley’s actions have a miraculous effect on Brian. He begins to see himself as a person of worth and value. As she lends a compassionate ear to him and listens to his personal story, his trust in her grows. As he listens to her story of pain and personal tragedy—her own husband was murdered and he died in her arms—his heart begins to open up and he empathizes with her. He comes to care about her and her family, as well as the people he shot. I was particularly moved by his response to her family photos. As Ashley puts it, “He looked at pictures of my family. He asked...if he could look at them and hold them.” There is such tenderness in that response.

But ultimately, he sees far more in her than just a desperate woman who has had a rough life. He sees her as a sister in Christ. This is evident in this beautiful passage from her account:

He said he thought that I was an angel sent from God. And that I was his sister and he was my brother in Christ. And that he was lost and God led him right to me to tell him that he had hurt a lot of people. And [my role was] to let him know how [those people and their families] felt, because I had gone through it myself.

He sees her as a child of God who has come to him not at random but for a divine purpose, with the special function of helping him to learn compassion and love.

Brian is immensely grateful for the gift of love Ashley gives him, as the passage quoted above indicates. Her kindness completely disarms him in every sense of the term (he ends up putting his guns under her bed). He is “overwhelmed” even by her simple gesture of making breakfast. You can feel the awe and wonder in his voice as he says, “Wow,...real butter, pancakes?” The Course often speaks of the gratitude we receive when we extend true helpfulness to our brothers in need: “The sick, who ask for love, are grateful for it, and in their joy they shine with holy thanks” (T-13.VI.10:5).

Just as Ashley’s love takes the form of ordinary human kindness, so does Brian’s response to that love. Of course, taking someone hostage at gunpoint and tying her up is the very antithesis of kindness—behavior worthy of the monster Brian initially thinks he is. But as Ashley’s kindness to him does its work and he comes to trust her, an amazing thing happens: he responds with acts of kindness himself. Even early on, he’s kind enough to cover her head while she’s tied up in the bathroom so she doesn’t have to see him take a shower. Later, he unties her and puts his guns away. Finally, he spares her life and releases her so she can see her daughter. As he releases her (he remains at her apartment while she leaves to see her daughter), he offers her money, asks if there’s anything he can do for her while she’s gone, and even offers to hang up the curtains he had earlier used to tie her up. In the end, he turns himself in to the authorities peacefully. He now acts like the Son of God he truly is, instead of a monster. I hope that once he goes to prison, which he certainly will, he will remember this and be a light to all the prisoners he encounters there.

### *4. Through saving Brian, Ashley herself is saved*

On the most literal level, of course, Ashley’s life is saved through her holy encounter with Brian. He lets her go. But the Course speaks of salvation in a different sense, saying that our salvation from the nightmare we seem to live in comes through giving salvation to others:

This is the spark that shines within the dream; that you can help [your brother] waken, and be sure his waking eyes will rest on you. And in his glad salvation you are saved. (T-29.III.5:6-7)

Has Ashley experienced salvation in this sense? Has her life been transformed as Brian's was? While I can't find any explicit statement of how she feels about herself now as a result of this experience, I think we can reasonably surmise that she has experienced salvation, at least to some degree. She is clearly someone who could use some saving, as we can see in the following passage from a *Newsweek* story:

Ashley Smith knew plenty about shame and despair, and about grace. As a teenager, she had been arrested for petty crimes. In her early 20s, she was charged with drunken driving and assault. She had held her dying husband in her arms, the victim of a stabbing. She lived apart from her 5-year-old daughter, Paige, who is in the custody of Smith's aunt. At rock bottom, Smith found help during a two-month stint at a Christian clinic for drug abusers, and worked to get her life together.

Now, imagine you are the person described here. You don't feel very good about yourself. You probably think of yourself as a pathetic loser, a failure, hardly a beloved child of God. You're trying to get your life together and then, all the sudden, you find yourself at the mercy of a killer. Where the heck is God?

But in this darkest pit of despair and terror, to your amazement you do something extraordinary. You practice exactly what your Christian books preach. You're able to extend love to and join with the person who's threatening to kill you. This person's gratitude shows you beyond a shadow of a doubt that your love has transformed his life. You've been miraculously released from this terrifying ordeal, and the entire country is now praising you as an exemplar of goodness, an inspiration to all. How would you feel about yourself if this happened to you? Would you not feel less like a loser, and more like a holy child of God?

I think Ashley has probably been transformed. I suspect that at least to a certain degree, as she saw Brian she's seeing herself. As she treated him, she's treating herself. As she thought of him, she's thinking of herself. I think this encounter has helped her find herself. I think saving Brian has indeed saved her.

### Applying this extreme example to our own lives

The holy encounter between Ashley Smith and Brian Nichols is an extreme example that can inspire us to have holy encounters with people in our lives—even our “attackers.” Fortunately, we don't have to wait until someone pulls a gun on us and ties us up in the bathroom to extend salvation to a brother in need. The *Time* article by Andrew Sullivan puts it this way:

That was an exceptional moment of redemption. But every day we have smaller, calmer chances to turn another's life around, to serve, to listen. How often do we simply not see what is in front of us? How often do we believe that the world's evils—from terrorism to crime to emotional cruelty—are beyond our capacity to change? Or that there is no one in front of us whom we can serve?

The world abounds with brothers whom we can serve, brothers with whom we can have “the holy encounters in which salvation can be found” (T-13.IV.7:7). The Course puts it this way:

Your brothers are everywhere. You do not have to seek far for salvation. Every minute and every second gives you a chance to save yourself. Do not lose these chances, not because they will not return, but because delay of joy is needless. (T-9.VII.1:4-7)

What are we waiting for?

### Exercise in having a holy encounter (by Robert Perry)

*In this exercise, you imagine having a holy encounter with another person, as a prelude to having an actual holy encounter with that person.*

Select some upcoming encounter, preferably one today or tomorrow, which you are reasonably certain will take place and which you think is likely to be an *unholy* encounter. It will probably help if you close your eyes.

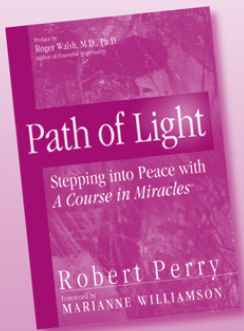
#### *Step 1. Make having a holy encounter your primary goal for the encounter*

Ask yourself, “What have I been seeing this encounter as being for? What have I been hoping it will accomplish for me?” Is it to get some sort of business done? To convince the person that you are right? To get out of the interaction in a minimal amount of time? To come off looking smart or witty or capable? To be liked? To survive?

Whatever that goal is, try to set it aside. See it as either secondary or altogether unimportant, whichever seems appropriate.

Then tell yourself that there is a potential the Holy Spirit has placed in this very encounter. Be determined to actualize it. Say to yourself, with as much sincerity as you can muster, “*My main goal is to have this be a holy encounter.*”

# WALKING THE PATH OF LIGHT



Testimonials from participants in the 2004 Walking the Path of Light retreat:

*"Since the retreat and now that I am reading Path of Light, I am experiencing real change! And I am excited about the Course again!"*

*"I came to the weekend to gain more 'knowledge' about the Course, but I have come away committed to choosing it as my path—can't wait to get started!"*

This innovative weekend retreat into the fascinating world of *A Course in Miracles* will benefit both new and experienced students of *A Course in Miracles*, as well as spiritual seekers simply curious about or open to exploring the Course as a spiritual path.

Based on Robert Perry's newest book, *Path of Light: Stepping into Peace with 'A Course in Miracles'*, this weekend offers participants an experience of the Course as a complete and practical path leading us home to God. Join Robert and the Circle staff and **learn how to:**

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- ♦ **experience** the Course's blessings and promises of deep peace of mind, happiness, joy, and healing in your relationships

We trust that you will have an experience that could shape, enrich—or even begin—your journey with the Course.

**Dates: Friday, July 1 – Sunday, July 3, 2005**  
**Place: Sedona Creative Life Center**



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The Sedona Creative Life Center is nestled in fifteen beautiful secluded acres, just a few minutes from the heart of Sedona, Arizona.

## *Step 2. During the encounter, silently repeat something that affirms this goal*

You can use whatever words help you, but I'll suggest some. Now imagine that you are with this person, actually in the midst of this encounter. To carry this goal into the encounter and actually make it happen, see yourself silently saying these words to the person you are with:

*"As I see you, I will see myself.  
As I treat you, I will treat myself.  
As I think of you, I will think of myself."*

These should shift your perception, so that you take the person more seriously, give him or her more respect. See yourself repeating these words when there is a lull in the conversation, or when things get a little tense, or when you feel judgmental.

*"As I see you, I will see myself.  
As I treat you, I will treat myself.  
As I think of you, I will think of myself."*

I find this part to be essential. If I don't carry some words like this into the encounter, I will probably forget entirely about my goal of having a holy encounter.

## *Step 3. Find ways to convey your new perception to this person*

The above steps will hopefully allow some spark of love into your mind. Now see yourself finding ways to express this love. See yourself expressing the love in your mind in whatever form seems appropriate, especially in the form of ordinary kindness.

Now see this person showing signs that they received your gift. Maybe they thank you, or just show it in their body language or facial expression. But in some way imagine this person showing that your gift has been received.

Now try to imagine how you will feel at the end of this encounter if you actually carry through with all this. Note to yourself how you imagine yourself feeling. See this feeling, which is almost surely being shared by the other person as well, as your goal. Amen.



**Greg Mackie** has been a student of *A Course in Miracles* since 1991, and a teacher for the *Circle of Atonement* since 1999. In addition to writing his “*Course Q & A*” page on the *Circle’s* website, he has assisted in teaching Allen Watson’s weekly in-depth *Course* class in Portland, Oregon. Greg also writes regularly for the *Circle’s* newsletter, *A Better Way*. He sees his primary function as helping to develop a tradition of *Course* scholarship.

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## Fejzić and His Cow

by Robert Perry

I recently came across a moving story of human kindness. I encountered it in a remarkable book that I would recommend to anyone. The book is entitled *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, by veteran war correspondent and former divinity student Chris Hedges. The title is misleading—this is anything but a pro-war book. Drawing upon his own encounters with war around the globe, Hedges claims that the reality of war is completely different from the myth of war, and yet the myth is virtually all that is available to those of us who lack firsthand experience. It is what we are fed by the government, by the media, by movies and literature, and by “history.” Once this myth grabs hold of a country, he says, it ignites something deep within human nature, and as a result, nearly everyone gets swept up in the fervor. Under its influence, an inhumanity is unleashed within people that normally lies hidden beneath the order of civil society. Few, he says, are immune to the collective madness.

But there *are* a few. Hedges tells the story of a Serb couple named Rosa and Drago Sorak, who lived in the Muslim city of Gorazde, in Bosnia. When the war in Bosnia broke out in 1992, the Soraks’ people, the Bosnian Serbs, were attacking the Soraks’ neighbors, the Muslims. However, the couple refused to leave, not realizing what that choice would mean. The Serbs attacking their city considered them traitors. The Muslims among whom they lived considered them the enemy. One of their sons was taken away for questioning and never seen again. The other son was struck and killed by a car. They were left childless. Some of their Muslim neighbors wanted to kill them. Gangs of Muslims would come looking for them at night and they would hide until the gangs had passed. They had little to eat.

Five months after the Soraks’ oldest son was taken for questioning, his wife, who lived with them, gave birth to a daughter. But she couldn’t nurse the infant, and they had no food for the infant. For five days they fed her tea. She was dying. Then one morning, a Muslim man, Fadil Fejzić, showed up at their door with a half a liter of milk. He had a cow in a nearby field, which he had to milk in the middle of the night to avoid being shot by Serbian snipers. The Soraks pick up the story:

He came the next morning, and the morning after that, and after that. Other families on the street began to insult him. They told him to give his milk to Muslims, to let the Chetnik children die. He never said a word. He refused our money. He came for 442 days....

It is our duty to always tell this story....Salt, in those days, cost \$80 a kilo. The milk he had was precious, all the more so because it was hard to keep animals. He gave us 221 liters. And every year at this time, when it is cold and dark, when we close our eyes, we can hear the boom of the heavy guns and the sound of Fadil Fejzić’s footsteps on the stairs. (pp. 52-53)

Hedges continues:

Despite their anger and loss, [the Soraks] could not listen to other Serbs talking about Muslims, or even recite their own sufferings, without telling of Fejzić and his cow. Here was the power of love. What this illiterate farmer did would color the life of another human being, who might never meet him, long after he was gone. In his act lay an ocean of hope....

The small acts of decency by people such as...Fejzić, a Muslim, in wartime ripple outwards like concentric circles. (pp. 52, 53)

Besides being deeply moved by this story, I couldn't help being reminded of the article I had just written. It was entitled "Helen and Bill's Joining: A Window onto the Heart of *A Course in Miracles*," and its claim was that the entire Course comes down to those instances in which two people set aside their separate interests and enter into a holy encounter. Like Hedges, I had written of individuals who found themselves encircled by conflict:

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.

And like Hedges, I spoke of what happened when those individuals reached out to each other across the divide of their differences:

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.

In Hedges' worldview, and in the Course's as well, the madness is so pervasive that we can't expect the collective to suddenly turn toward sanity. We can't expect our leaders to wake up one day and become enlightened. We can't expect the people to suddenly embrace peace and love and march hand-in-hand into a golden age. While the world is still wreathed in madness, our hope comes, in Hedges' words, from individuals whose "acts defy the collective psychosis" (p. 48)—defy it not through loud protests, but through quiet deeds of uncommon compassion. As Hedges writes:

The only solace comes from simple acts of kindness. They are the tiny, flickering candles in a cavern of darkness that sustain our common humanity. (p. 116)



**Robert Perry** has authored, or co-authored with Allen Watson, nineteen books on *A Course in Miracles*. He is an internationally recognized authority on the Course, and has traveled extensively.

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## Your Name Is Brother

by **Greg Mackie**



I really enjoy works of art—books, movies, plays and the like—that have Course-like themes. Even when they are fiction, the truths they convey move me and inspire me to walk the Course's path with greater devotion. One of my favorite works in this regard is Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*—the story of Jean Valjean, the criminal seeking redemption, and Inspector Javert, the policeman determined to hunt him down and send him back to prison for good (as potent a symbol of the ego as you can find). I have seen the Broadway musical version and several movie and television versions, but now I've finally decided to read the book.

One of my favorite scenes in *Les Misérables* is Jean Valjean's encounter with the good Bishop of Digne, who is known to all as Monseigneur Bienvenu ("Monsignor Welcome"). Valjean has just been paroled from prison after nineteen years, and everyone he encounters rejects him. No inn will take him, no one will give him a meal, children throw rocks at him; he is a despised outcast.



Finally, someone points him to the bishop's residence, and only there does he find welcome. He tells the bishop about his past, but Monseigneur Bienvenu is completely unfazed. The book goes into much more detail about their encounter than any of the film or stage versions do, and as I read, I was particularly moved by this passage, which depicts an exchange that takes place during dinner:

“Monsieur le curé,” said the man [Jean Valjean], “you are very good. You don't despise me. You have taken me in and lighted your candles for me. But I have not concealed from you where I come from and what I am.”

The bishop, seated at his side, laid a hand gently on his arm.

“You need have told me nothing. This house is not mine but Christ's. It does not ask a man his name but whether he is in need. You are in trouble, you are hungry and thirsty, and so you are welcome. You need not thank me for receiving you in my house. No one is at home here except those seeking shelter. Let me assure you, passer-by though you are, that this is more your home than mine. Everything in it is yours. Why should I ask your name? In any case I knew it before you told me.”

The man looked up with startled eyes. “You knew my name?”

“Of course,” said the bishop. “Your name is brother.”

Thus begins a fierce battle within Valjean's soul between the embittered criminal he had been for so many years and the goodness and dignity the bishop sees in him. Unfortunately, later that night, the embittered criminal wins the first round. During dinner, Valjean had noticed the expensive silverware at the bishop's table—his ticket out of destitution. So, late that night, he steals the silver and flees into the darkness.

The police capture him, however, and with the evidence of his betrayal of the bishop's trust in his hands, he is brought before him. One word from the bishop, and Jean Valjean will return to prison, probably for life. Instead of condemning Jean Valjean, however, Monseigneur Bienvenu turns the tables completely:

“So here you are!” he cried to Valjean. I'm delighted to see you. Had you forgotten that I gave you the candlesticks as well? They're silver like the rest, and worth a good two hundred francs. Did you forget to take them?”

Jean Valjean's eyes had widened. He was now staring at the old man with an expression no words can convey.

The police release Valjean, and after they are gone, Monseigneur Bienvenu instructs him to use the money gained from the silver to make himself an honest man. Then the good bishop bids him farewell with a benediction: “Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to what is evil, but to what is good. I have bought your soul to save it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God.”

Later on, however, the battle within Valjean continues. He steals a coin from a little boy named Petit-Gervais. He is immediately ashamed of what he has done and tries to return the coin, but it is too late—the boy is gone. Jean Valjean weeps in agony, and the battle comes to a head. On one side is the old Jean Valjean, the criminal. On the other is the new man trying to be born in him, symbolized by the good bishop. Finally, resolution comes:

His mind's eye considered these two men now presented to him, the bishop and Jean Valjean. Only the first could have overshadowed the second. By a singular process special to this kind of ecstasy, as his trance continued the bishop grew and gained splendor in his eyes, while Jean Valjean shrank and faded. A moment came when Valjean was no more than a shadow, and then he vanished entirely. The bishop alone remained, flooding that unhappy soul with radiance.

Valjean weeps some more, but this time “as he wept a new day dawned in his spirit.” From that day forward, the embittered criminal is gone. Jean Valjean becomes a giver of shelter to all his brothers and sisters in need, just like the bishop himself. “Thereafter...he was a changed man, enacting in his life what the bishop had sought to make of him. It was more than a transformation; it was a transfiguration.”

Though this account is fiction, Monseigneur Bienvenu can be our role model, just as he becomes for Jean Valjean. He is the perfect model of the indiscriminate generosity the Course calls us to practice in our lives. “When you bring in the stranger, he becomes your brother” (T-1.III.7:6). The bishop brings in the stranger Jean Valjean, seeing him as a brother in need, one to whom he can give. He invites this brother whom everyone else has rejected into his home. He welcomes this brother whom no one else would take in and gives him dinner and a bed for the night.

Then there is the final act, the giving of the candlesticks, which reminds me of the teachings of the historical Jesus. Jesus taught that when someone strikes us on one cheek we should turn the other cheek, when someone asks for our coat we should give him our shirt as well, and when someone conscripts us to walk a mile we should walk two. In other words, when someone takes from us, not only should we let him have what he has taken, but we should give him more. This is exactly what

Monseigneur Bienvenu does: not only does he let Valjean have the silverware he has stolen, but he gives the silver candlesticks as well.

By so doing, he sets Valjean free both literally and figuratively, and teaches him a powerful lesson about the nature of God: God loves us so much that all He does is give to us without reservation, without any thought of whether we “deserve” it or not. The bishop’s gift impacts Valjean so deeply that, in time, it brings about a transfiguration of his soul. In Course terms, you could say that Valjean discovers his true Self. He too becomes an indiscriminate giver, imitating God just as the bishop himself had done, giving everyone he encounters the priceless gift of God’s Love. Through this giving, Valjean finds redemption. Truly, the holy encounter with Monseigneur Bienvenu is his salvation.

Let me remember this the next time I encounter someone in need. Let me remember to give to him as God gives and thus share with him the indiscriminate generosity and unconditional Love of God. Let me remember that even if this person is a stranger to me, in truth his name is brother.