



# A BETTER WAY

## What Is God Like?

by Robert Perry

### CONTENTS

#### What is God Like?

by Robert Perry 1

This is a hugely important question. How we see God colors how we see everything. If we see an angry God, we will always be looking over our shoulder waiting for Him to catch up with us, eyeing everyone as a potential instrument of His vengeance. If we see a remote, indifferent God, we will feel cast adrift on the open sea, left alone to survive by our wits and gumption. If we see a loving God—and truly believe in that lov-

ing God deep in our hearts—then we can rest easy, floating through life in a worry-free state, knowing that we are carried along by the Everlasting Arms.

I am taking these three categories—God as angry, as indifferent, or as loving—from the writings of author and Jesus scholar Marcus Borg. In his book *Jesus: The Life and Teachings of a Religious Revolutionary*, he says,

Deep within all of us is an image of reality [meaning, ultimate reality, which for many of us means God], whether consciously articulated or not, that more than anything else shapes how we live. We may image reality as indifferent, as threatening or destructive, or as nurturing and life-giving. How we see reality fundamentally affects our response to life.

In this article, I want to look at our attitude toward God and look especially at how *A Course in Miracles* portrays God. I will use Borg's three categories of threatening, indifferent, or loving as handy pegs on which to hang our different attitudes toward God. Indeed, I think that many of us can see our history with God as a journey through these categories.

Many of us began by believing in a God Who was said to be loving, but Who had a decidedly hostile side. He was punitive and given to acts of violence. He drowned all those charioteers in the Red Sea, for instance. Indeed, He drowned the entire world, except for the contents of one boat. He had His Own Son brutally murdered to appease His wrath. These stories may have been from long ago, but they had definite implications for our lives in the present. We wondered if having a car accident or losing our job was God's punishment for something we had done wrong. Or maybe He was testing our faith, and we worried about whether or not we were passing the test. This God definitely didn't want us to have much fun. For some reason, He outfitted us with a whole host of impulses and desires and then commanded us to resist and repress them. And we feared that if we didn't succeed at that, if we gave into temptation today, we might ruin our chances for eternity.

If you are reading this article, you have no doubt put that God behind you, at least to the best of your ability. However, when many of us put this God behind us and opt for something new, we often opt for some version of the *indifferent* God. This takes many forms. Perhaps the most common form is believ-

## PUBLISHED BY

Circle of Atonement  
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.org](mailto:info@circleofa.org)  
Website: [www.circleofa.org](http://www.circleofa.org)  
Bookstore: [www.circlepublishing.org](http://www.circlepublishing.org)

## SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

*A Better Way* is published monthly by e-mail. If you wish to subscribe, please visit our website.

## CIRCLE OF ATONEMENT

is a nonprofit, tax-exempt corporation dedicated to *A Course in Miracles*. It was founded in 1993. Its publishing division, Circle Publishing, was founded in 2003.

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Robert Perry  
Nicola Perry  
Greg Mackie  
André Gendron  
Rick Baker

## THE CIRCLE'S FINANCIAL POLICY

As stated in the *Psychotherapy* pamphlet: "One rule should always be observed: No one should be turned away because he cannot pay" (P-3.III.6:1). If there are any of our materials or services that you want but cannot afford, please let us know, and give whatever you can.

## THE CIRCLE'S REQUEST

You can have a profound effect on our ability to extend Jesus' vision of peace, love and understanding into the world and in assisting the implementation of the Circle's Financial Policy.

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

## MAILING LIST POLICY

The Circle will share its mailing list on request with other *A Course in Miracles* organizations, using our discretion and being sensitive to guidance. If you do not want your name shared in this way, please let us know and we will ensure it is not.

## 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.

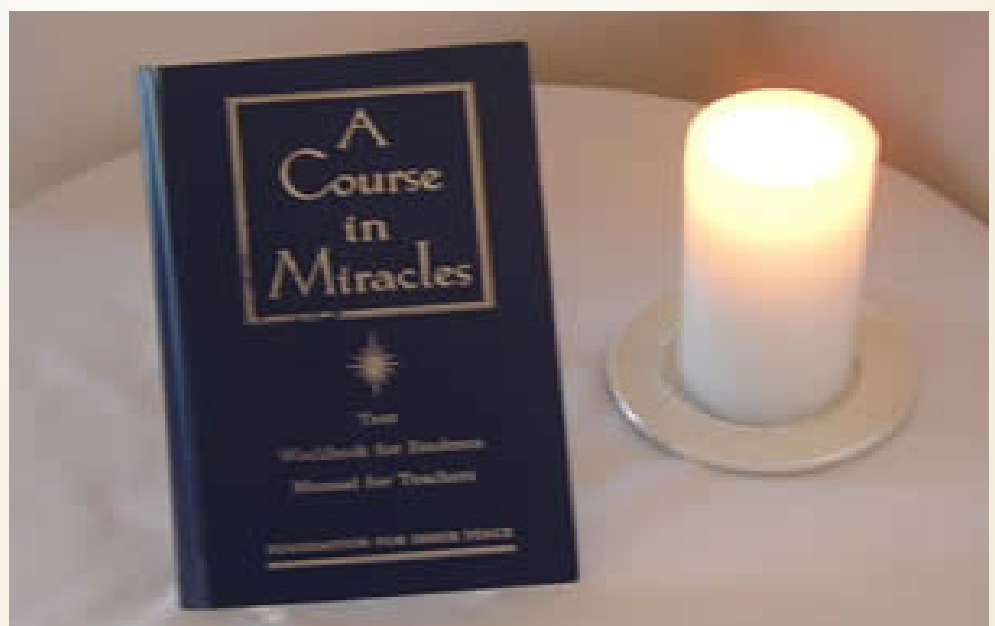
The Course's message is that the source of our suffering is not the world's mistreatment of us, but rather our egocentric attack on the world. This attack convinces us that we have defiled our nature beyond repair, that we are irredeemably guilty. Yet the Course says true reality cannot be defiled; it 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.

## REGULAR CLASSES ♦ SEDONA, AZ

Daily Morning Workbook Class  
With Robert Perry and Greg Mackie  
Weekdays, 8:30 - 9:30 am  
Contact our office for information  
[info@circleofa.org](mailto:info@circleofa.org) - (928) 282-0790

## REGULAR CLASSES ♦ PORTLAND, OR

Weekly Morning Class  
With Allen Watson  
In-depth study of the Text of  
*A Course in Miracles*  
Tuesdays, 10:30am - 12:30 pm  
Contact Allen Watson  
[allen@circleofa.org](mailto:allen@circleofa.org) - (503) 916-9411



ing that God exists but is not particularly accessible and available for help. The extreme version of this attitude was enshrined in Deism, the belief, popular among Enlightenment thinkers, that God created the universe but then abandoned it, leaving us to our own devices.

Another common form of the indifferent God is believing in an impersonal God, viewing God as some sort of energy or essence, as pure consciousness or suchness, or as the ground of being or the Void. There are, of course, many good reasons for viewing God as an impersonal ground of being. Yet I think that part of the attraction of this view is that it gets us away from that scary and repugnant personal God Who issued commandments and then dealt with disobedience like an unstable tyrant.

Many people bypass the indifferent God altogether and go straight to the indifferent *universe*. These, of course, are agnostics and atheists. Again, I believe there are a lot of good reasons for being an agnostic or atheist, but again, I think that part of the attraction is getting as far away as one can from the demanding, judgmental God.

As Course students, we have our own version of the indifferent God. It has become almost axiomatic among Course students that God doesn't know we are here. I recently was asked, "Isn't it true that God doesn't know we exist?" God is often viewed by Course students as impersonal, analogous to the Void of Eastern mysticism. For instance, when I teach what I call Name of God meditation (from Workbook Lesson 183) and ask students to choose a name of God to repeat in their meditation, they nearly always choose impersonal names like "essence" or "peace" or "now."

Yet an impersonal God that doesn't know we are here is obviously the very picture of indifference. We may call Him loving, but if He doesn't actually help us in our plight, isn't indifference a more apt description? It is hard for us to conceptualize how such a God is relevant to our lives, and so, in my experience, most Course students speak far more frequently about the Holy Spirit than about God. The Holy Spirit is the One Who helps us and guides, while God remains remote, aloof from the happenings on earth.

The concept of the Holy Spirit that most Course students hold, however, does carry them toward the final category, that of the loving God. In my experience, most students see the Holy Spirit as a benign presence Who genuinely has our best interests in mind and Who actively reaches out to us with guidance and healing. This does supply the Divine with a loving and caring face, but it doesn't entirely lift us out of the previous category, for at the summit of reality there is still this vast indifference. In this view, aloofness is the highest stance to take. And it's left to a lower-level Spirit to give us a hand down here.

Of course, there are Course students who actually believe that God Himself speaks to us and answers our prayers. They have reached all the way to belief in a genuinely loving God. However, a question immediately arises in our minds: Are these students really in line with the Course, or are they just hanging on to a more comforting, traditional point of view? This underscores the crucial need to find out where in fact the Course does stand on this most important of issues. What is God like, according to *A Course in Miracles*?

### **What is the Course's view?**

When we actually turn to the pages of the Course for its view of God, we encounter a series of surprises.

First, the Course talks far more about God than the Holy Spirit. I looked up a list of the most common words used in the Course to refer to God (God, God's, Father, Creator, He, Him, His, Himself, Who, You, Your) and used to refer to the Holy Spirit (Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit's, Voice, He, Him, His, Himself, Who, You, Your). Then, using the *Concordance of 'A Course in Miracles'*, I added up the number of times God and the Holy Spirit were referred to using these words. God: 10,102. The Holy Spirit: 2,971. The difference is enormous. In talking about the Holy Spirit more than God, we Course students have it precisely backwards.

Second, the Course says that God *does* know about our separated condition; He just doesn't know the details. I get this from two contrasting things said by the Course. On the one hand, it says that God knows that we have fallen asleep and that we are unhappy. Indeed, "He knows it in His Own Being and its experience of His Son's experience" (T-4.VII.6:6). This is a remarkable line. It says that God's Being is having a direct experience of our experience down here. His Being is directly experiencing our lack of joy. On the other hand, the Course clearly states that God is unaware of form ("God knows not form"—T-30.III.4:5). To put these

two together, God directly experiences our experience down here, but as an *essence*, stripped of all form. He knows the gist, not the details.

Third, the Course portrays a continuity between God's causation and the Holy Spirit's actions, so that what the Holy Spirit does, God is doing through Him. We often think of the Holy Spirit as a distinct Being Who acts on *behalf* of God, and there is truth in that. That's the implication of calling the Holy Spirit the Voice *for* God, rather than the Voice *of* God. Yet the relationship is not so cut-and-dried, for the Holy Spirit is *Himself* an activity of God. He is God's *Call*, and a call, of course, is an *action*. Yes, the Holy Spirit is a Being created by God, but He is also an *activity* on God's part.

Since the Holy Spirit is Himself a doing of God's (so to speak), whatever the Holy Spirit does, God is doing. This idea allows the Course to say things like, "Hear your Father speak to you through His appointed Voice" (W-pI.106.2:1), which means that when you hear the Holy Spirit speak to you, you are also hearing *God* speak to you ("through His...Voice"). It also allows the Course to put these words on our lips: "God is with me....He is...the Spirit Which directs my actions, offers me Its Thoughts, and guarantees my safety from all pain" (W-pII.222.1:3). This is a remarkable passage. In the clearest language, it says that *God* is the Spirit Which directs my actions and offers me Its Thoughts. God is the Holy Spirit!

With this idea of God working through the Holy Spirit, the Course can say, and really *mean*, that God hears our calls and answers them. In fact, I have found eighteen passages that say exactly that. For example, "You [God]...always will be there to hear my call to You and answer me" (W-pII.232.1:3). Further, there is not one place in the Course which says that God doesn't hear our calls—*not one*. Eighteen to zero is as clear-cut as you get.

Fourth, the language about God in the Course is *personal* language. God is talked about as a having a Mind, a Will, Thoughts, Feelings, and Purposes. He hears and speaks, He knows and responds, He makes promises and keeps them. He is described, in short, as a Person (even though the Course doesn't use that word, it does describe that concept). Yes, He is a Person with no body, form, or limitation, but still a Person.

This is not some of the language about God. This is almost every single word of it. There are brief references to God as something that could be described as an "It"—for instance, as an idea (T-15.VI.4:4), as "Divine Abstraction" (T-4.VII.5:4), or as the sky (T-30.III.9:1)—but apart from such brief instances, all of the language is personal. I remember several years ago in a class I taught on prayer in the Course, a long-time student and teacher remarked how different was the language about God in the Workbook prayers than in the rest of the Course. The language in the prayers, she said, was so personal, whereas the rest of the Course talked about God in more impersonal terms. The fact was, though, that she just hadn't noticed how the rest of the Course actually talks about God. To show how it does, I just now opened my Text at random. The first page I opened to has this language about God:

The meaning of love is the meaning God gave to it. Give to it any meaning apart from His, and it is impossible to understand it. God loves every brother as He loves you; neither less nor more. He needs them all equally, and so do you. (T-15.V.10:3-6)

Think you that you can judge the Self of [created by] God? God has created It beyond judgment, out of His need to extend His Love. (T-15.V.11:1-2)

Look at how God is characterized here. He *loves*. He loves every brother the same as every other one. His need to give Love is so great that it impels Him to create. He *needs*. He needs every single brother. He needs to extend His Love. He *creates*. He created Christ (the "Self" referred to in the second quote). He created love itself (which, of course, is why He could give love its meaning). In short, this is a God Who loves, Who needs, and Who creates. This is not an impersonal Void. And you can find God described in similar ways on nearly every page of the Course.

So, if God is a (limitless) Person Who thinks, wills, feels, and knows, Who hears our calls and responds, what *kind* of Person is He? What is His character? This is where this topic gets the most interesting. For the actual statements made by the Course stretch our minds further in the direction of a loving God than they seem capable of going. Even though many Course students have to some degree incorporated a view of God



as a loving Presence Who is near and available, I suspect that there isn't a Course student alive who has gone far enough in this direction. Hard to believe, but you will see what I mean. To show you, I will examine three Course passages about God and draw out their meaning.

### **"I am he on whom You smile"**

*I am he on whom You smile in love and tenderness so dear and deep and still the universe smiles back on You. (W-pII.341.1:2-3)*

Here you acknowledge to God that He is smiling on you. And this is no aloof smile. He is smiling on you "in love and tenderness." "Tenderness" is a very personal quality, with connotations of kindness, gentleness, and protectiveness. Another prayer speaks of God's Love as possessing a "tenderness I cannot comprehend" (W-pII.233.1:7). Further, this love and tenderness is "dear," meaning "cherished," "precious." This seems to mean that God's tender Love for us is cherished or precious to Him. It all sounds so very personal. Indeed, it can almost sound overly sentimental. Yet this impression is balanced out by the fact that the love and tenderness are also "deep and still." This is not gushy sentimentalism. This is a *deep* love, which in its utter certainty is absolutely *still*.

To get the sense of this passage, try to imagine God *smiling* on you, smiling on you in *love* and *tenderness*, in a love that is *dear*...and *deep*...and *still*. How could you turn away from that smile? How could your whole being not smile back? And that is exactly what our passage says: "the universe smiles back on You." This is the kind of God the Course is talking about, and the kind of relationship with Him it is calling us to have. To use the words of the prayer, it wants us to spend our days as we spend eternity, "abiding in Your smile."

### **"Listen to the story of the prodigal son"**

Listen to the story of the prodigal son, and learn what God's treasure is and yours: This son of a loving father left his home and thought he had squandered everything for nothing of any value, although he had not understood its worthlessness at the time. He was ashamed to return to his father, because he thought he had hurt him. Yet when he came home the father welcomed him with joy, because the son himself *was* his father's treasure. He wanted nothing else. (T-8.VI.4:1-4)

It is significant that the only gospel parable retold in the Course is the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). The father's love in that parable is not just extreme; it is so apparently reckless as to be unsettling. We all know the story. The younger son asks for his share of the inheritance, as if his father is dead. Remarkably, the father consents and the son then takes his money and leaves home for a "far country," a Gentile land, where he quickly blows his entire inheritance (on prostitutes, according to his older brother). When conditions get truly desperate for him, he decides to return home, saying to his father, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." We expect the father to either reject him entirely or to take him back with residual anger and some stiff conditions. At the very least, we expect the father to ask for an explanation—what on earth happened? But the father, who spots the son from afar and literally runs out to meet him, will have none of it. Instead, he throws his arms around his son and kisses him. He brushes aside the son's rehearsed speech and has the servants immediately clothe his son in the best robe he's got, put a ring on his finger, and kill the fatted calf. He says to them, "Let us eat and celebrate," and then can't stop himself from explaining why: "for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"

The father's behavior is so extravagant that we have to wonder if he's in his right mind. His love seems every bit as prodigal as his son's spending. Maybe, we think, this is a story of a family with some serious boundary issues (as I heard one interpreter say). Jesus expected us to have such questions. After all, the final part of his story has the older brother voicing some of the very disbelief that has been crossing the minds of his listeners.

This is Jesus of Nazareth's vision of God, a God Whose Love is so extravagant that it crosses the lines of propriety and leaves us questioning the prudence of such an unrestrained love. By retelling this parable at

length and with approval, the Jesus of the Course lets us know that this is *his* vision of God as well. Indeed, he explains here what is left implied in the original story: The son thought he had squandered his father's treasure, but when he returned home he discovered that he *was* his father's treasure. His father "wanted nothing else." And that is how our Father feels about us, as the next line explains: "God wants only His Son because His Son is His only treasure" (T-8.VI.5:1). In other words, God wants us home *in the same way* that the prodigal son's father wanted his son home. Why? Because *we* are His treasure. In its retelling of this parable, the Course fuses its vision of God with the vision of the parable. It is hardly a picture of impersonal suchness. Rather, it is a portrait that startles us with the depth and extravagance of its love.

### **"As a mother loves her child"**

The final passage I want to look at amplifies the preceding portrait. It is not from the Course, but from "The Gifts of God," considered the final authentic scribing of Helen Schucman (found at the back of the collection of her poetry, *The Gifts of God*). Its concluding section is entitled "The Father's Love." Among many moving lines about God's Love we find this one:

He loves you as a mother loves her child; her only one, the only love she has, her all-in-all,  
extension of herself, as much a part of her as breath itself. (*The Gifts of God*, p. 126)

This sentence requires no elaboration. We recognize it immediately as perhaps the most extreme image available in our world of an all-encompassing love. To make its import sink in deeper, you might want to imagine that God is saying it to you personally:

[Name], I love you as a mother loves her child;  
her only one,  
the only love she has,  
her all-in-all,  
extension of herself,  
as much a part of her as breath itself.

Can we take in such an extreme image? Can we actually imagine that God loves us like this? The image is so radical, I find, that the mind easily balks. How can this be? How can God love me with such intensity?

### **Objections**

In its balking, the mind can immediately throw up a number of roadblocks:

"Isn't this just a metaphor?" Yes, of course, it's a metaphor. God is not literally a human mother with one child. God is not literally a Middle Eastern father with sons, servants, and a fat calf. But that does not allow us to simply dismiss this portrait of God. The whole point of a metaphor is to suggest a *likeness* between a concrete, familiar thing and what the metaphor is really talking about. Thus, God is *like* the father of the prodigal son. God loves you *like* a mother loves her child. Indeed, when human metaphors are used for God, those metaphors are usually regarded as only faint approximations of the literal thing about God to which they point. Thus, by calling these images *metaphors*, we are really saying that God loves us a lot *more* than a mother loves her only child, or a lot *more* than the father loves the prodigal son. Playing the metaphor card does not let us off the hook here. Indeed, it does the exact opposite.

"Is this really in keeping with the rest of the Course?" To answer this, just look back at the language about God from that page I randomly opened to. That language said that "He needs them all equally"—meaning, He needs every single one of us. Indeed, He created us all "out of His need to extend His Love." This is not a detached God. This is a God Who needs His Sons and Who needs to be a Father. This is the God of the Prodigal Son. Here, in the sort of language that we brush by on nearly every page of the Course, is this same extreme vision of God's all-encompassing Love.

"But how can a formless God feel such personal love?" The Course does call God "Formlessness Itself" (W-pI.186.14:1), and it is very hard to understand how such unbridled personal love can exist within formless-

ness. Yet do we understand formlessness? The Course is very clear that we do not—and *cannot* in this world (see W-pI.161.4). And if we don't understand it, how do we know what can exist within it? How do we know that "Formlessness Itself" cannot love us "as a mother loves her child"? The Course never remotely suggests that the two are incompatible.

"If God loved me this much, wouldn't He have made sure that I got treated better down here?" It's crucial to realize that in the Course, God is not in charge of this world. We need to picture Him not as president of the nations and architect of nature, but more like a voice of protest from outside the system, or, to be more accurate, a Voice of Love from outside the system. If He were let in, He would inaugurate a very different world, but it's up to us to let Him in.

"If God loves me so much, why is He constantly asking me to give up the things I like?" Part of why we view God with suspicion, of course, is that He asks us to give up favorite mental habits like anger and judgment and detach from conventional pleasures like "power, fame, money, physical pleasure" (M-13.2:6). The Course, however, has an easy explanation for this. It calls these things "sharp-edged children's toys" (W-pII.4.5:2)—things we like to play with but which just end up making us bleed. In asking us to abandon these things, God is simply playing His role as the loving mother. "Babies scream in rage if you take away a knife or scissors, although they may well harm themselves if you do not. In this sense you are still a baby" (T-4.II.5:2-3).

"But how could *God* love *me* like *that*?" With this question, I think we are getting closer to the real heart of our objections. It is just so hard to imagine *anyone* loving us like this, and all the harder to imagine *God* doing so. The Course openly says that God's Love for us is beyond our comprehension. "You cannot understand how much your Father loves you, for there is no parallel in your experience of the world to help you understand it" (T-14.IV.8:4). But does that make it false?

Also, notice that line "there is no parallel in your experience." This shows that the metaphors of the father of the prodigal son and the mother of the only child are insufficient to really capture God's Love. They point in the right direction, but they are not true parallels. They are simply not loving *enough*.

The Course itself actually offers an account of our true, underlying reasons for keeping this Love at a distance. In the Course's view, it's not because we *doubt* that it's there, but because, deep down, we *know* it's there. The bottom line is that we fear it, because we believe that in its presence, we would lose our grip on our separate self. The Course says that God's "pull is so strong that you cannot resist it" (T-13.II.1:2). "You could not control your joyous response to the call of love" (T-13.III.5:3). "You are afraid it would sweep you away from yourself" (T-13.III.4:2). "You are afraid that you will be uprooted" (Urtext). In short, we are afraid that we will lose control of ourselves, abandon our separate existence, and dive back into that irresistible Love. Better, then, to keep it at arm's length. Better to pretend that we don't even know it's there, and that we doubt its existence. Otherwise, we could lose everything.

Perhaps this is the real reason that it is so difficult to internalize this view of God. And it is difficult. We can come face to face with these teachings and pray these prayers for years, and yet a deep-rooted, immovable skepticism still remains in us. "There is no way that God loves me like that."

Yet we cannot even begin to dissolve that skepticism until we are truly aware of what the Course actually teaches about God. We need to know that it's not enough to move on from the hostile God and relocate to the coolly indifferent God. It's not even enough to leave the indifferent God and settle for a benign God Who is attentive to our needs and answers our prayers. No, the Course is calling us much farther than that. It is calling us to acknowledge a God Whose Love is so intense, so all-encompassing that some reflex in us wants to question it, doubt it, and ultimately defuse it. For in the face of the most sweet and overwhelming Love there is, the pull would be irresistible. We would inevitably abandon our ego and our world and leap into the Arms of our Father.

But would that be so bad?



E-mail your comments to the author at: [robert@circleofa.org](mailto:robert@circleofa.org)

**Robert Perry.** *He is the author or co-author of twenty books and booklets, including Path of Light: Stepping into Peace with 'A Course in Miracles'.*

*Our regular features—Letters to the Editor, What We Are Reading, and Recently Posted Articles—will be back again next month.*