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A BETTER WAY

Anchoring a Tradition

Why We Are Launching the Circle Course Community, Part II

by Robert Perry

Jesus changed the world—we all know that. The world we live in is different in so many ways because he lived. And yet his legacy remains a deeply mixed bag, a bewildering tangle of both light and darkness. No one needs to remind us of all the hatred, war, and intolerance that have been visited on this earth in his name.

Yet one has to wonder: What would his legacy have been if those who came after him had really carried through with his vision? There is mounting evidence that Jesus was a very different figure than tradition has passed down to us—that, as Jesus scholar Stephen Patterson put it, “Jesus was a wisdom teacher, and that the early Jesus movement thought of itself as a kind of wisdom school” (*The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus*, p. 232). According to this evidence, he had a vision of individuals entering into a radically transformed condition, in which they experienced themselves as living under the care of an indiscriminately loving Father. While wrapped in His protection, they could afford to relate to others with the same indiscriminate love that He showed them. They could return good for evil, and with this power they could change the world. They could bring the kingdom of God down to earth.

Of course, things didn’t go that way. Within a few decades, the emphasis shifted from following Jesus the wisdom teacher to believing in Jesus the divine savior. It was no longer about reaching a transformed state in this life, but a blessed destiny in the next. This switch from Jesus the teacher to Jesus the savior was pivotal. In my view, this is where it all went south. But one still has to wonder: What would have happened if the community that grew up in his name had held fast to his vision? What if that community had become a global movement of people united in the goal of actually living his radical teachings? What would the world be like today?

These questions may seem rather distant from our lives, but in fact they are intensely relevant for us. For we are students of a book that claims to be a return of Jesus. If *A Course in Miracles* really did come from Jesus, its very existence implies that humanity didn’t adequately receive his gift the first time, and so the wisdom teacher has come back. He has restated his ancient message, he has called us again to the ancient task, hoping that this time we will answer the call.

Helen Schucman received guidance to this very effect. On October 2, 1976, in speaking of sending the disciples out to proclaim his message, Jesus told her, “They did not understand. But now I talk to you and give you the same message.” On December 31, 1975, in a discourse on the Course’s future, he said, “It must develop without error, and with nothing to mar its perfect purity.” Then he added, “This time there will be no failure, no loss of truth, no misunderstanding and no misinterpretation.” It’s not hard to see what he’s driving at. After all the “error,” “failure,” and “misinterpretation” that happened the first time, he is hoping that “this time” we will get it right. And if we do, the results will be world changing. “The course,” he promised, “will grow from infancy into a helper of the world.”

It appears, then, that Jesus has once again laid before his followers a sublime opportunity—and awesome responsibility. He has placed his incomparable gifts in our hands and then quietly said, “We can change the world, if you acknowledge them” (W-pI.164.9:2).

How are we doing with this so far? My personal opinion is that we haven’t gotten started yet. Having spent my adult life in the Course community, my experience is that we are more or less fooling around with the Course. We are dabbling with it. We are making it one ingredient in a New Age cocktail. We are using it to find momentary comfort rather than lasting transformation. We are not treating it as we would treat a living teacher who was sitting in front of us and saying those things. We value our “freedom” too much. Just as the early Christians found a way to embrace Jesus while subtly avoiding

PUBLISHED BY

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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.

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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.

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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.

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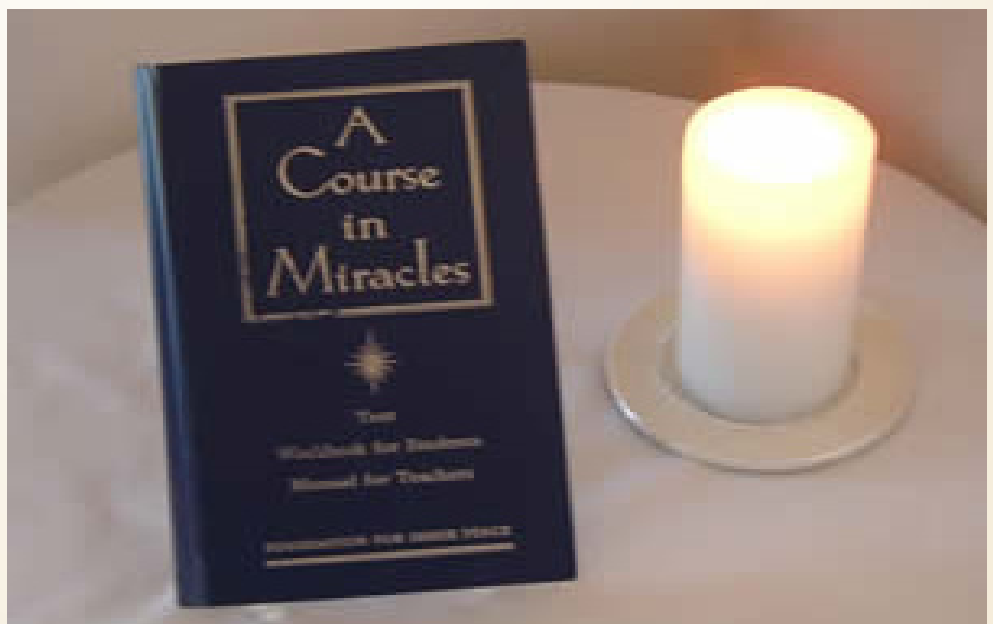
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the transformation to which he called them, I think we are doing the same thing with the Course.

But that is all right. It is still so early in the game. To use Christianity's timeline, we are at 60 A.D. right now. We are at the very beginning. And just as they could have chosen to lay the foundation for a different kind of Christianity, so we can decide to lay the foundation for a different future for the Course.

I have felt for many years that there is one hope for the Course to accomplish the purpose for which it came. It needs to be wrapped in an ongoing tradition, a tradition whose sole purpose is to help people do the Course the way its author laid it out. When it comes to shedding the ego, we humans are notoriously weak; we need lots of support and guidance. To really climb the mountain that Jesus asks us to climb, we need the strength of an entire tradition holding us up.

I have always felt that the example of Alcoholics Anonymous is very instructive. AA was formed to deal with an incredibly tenacious addiction. Its founders discovered that, in order to rise above the addiction of alcoholism, people need both a step-by-step path—the Twelve Steps—and they need to be surrounded by a culture of others on that same path. They need meetings. They need speakers. They need sponsors (mentors). And ideally they need this culture seasoned by generations of experience. They need, in short, a tradition that provides them with support and that surrounds them with the accumulated wisdom of countless others who walked this way before them. Where would Alcoholics Anonymous be if there were no such tradition, if people bought the Big Book from the bookstore and then did it on their own, having been told that it was a self-study program?

Do we really think that we Course students are going to rise above the addiction of the ego—an immeasurably *more* tenacious addiction—by going the self-study route? It's not going to happen. (And in fact, Jesus never called this a self-study course.) We need exactly what the people in AA need, only we probably need it even more. We need *our* step-by-step path wrapped in a tradition, an enduring culture of people joined in walking its way. Realistically speaking, this is the only way that we, “whose motivation is inconsistent, and who remain heavily defended against learning” (W-pI.95.6:3), will ever really follow Jesus' instructions and thereby reach the heights that he envisioned for us.

What would this tradition look like? It would contain a great variety of activities—from personal study and practice, to meetings between teachers and their pupils, to visits by healers to patients, to various kinds of study group meetings, to workshops and other sorts of gatherings. I have long imagined someone being able to walk into any major city and find Course centers, groups, teachers, and healers, perhaps loosely affiliated, but all united in the single task of doing the Course as the author laid it out.

The key, the thing that would join these centers, groups, teachers, and healers into a single tradition, would be a common dedication to doing the Course *by the book*. I confess to feeling slightly squeamish even writing the phrase “by the book.” It sounds such a sour note. We Course students tend to celebrate our freedom to do the Course however we want. We prize the idea that the Course means whatever it means *to us*. We rejoice in the diversity of interpretations out there, dutifully affirming that each one has an important place in the overall tapestry.

Yet in this “anything goes” approach, we tend to overlook one obvious fact: When Jesus composed the Course's words, there was something he was trying to say. He had a particular meaning he was trying to communicate. This simple fact has power to revolutionize how students approach the Course. At this point, students tend to settle on the meaning that “works” best for them, or is most inspiring or affirming, or fits their expectations, or sounds like what they have heard elsewhere. A line from the Course could mean anything, depending on how it bounces off these very individual criteria. But once you realize that the author was attempting to communicate a particular meaning, the only approach that makes sense is a fundamentally different one: to seek the meaning that *he* was trying to convey.

This single change, as confining as it sounds, is actually the doorway into the treasure house of the Course. For now we can treat Jesus as an actual teacher, we can really take his course, we can follow *his* curriculum, rather than our own, and thus we can finally reap the rewards he promises us.

Imagine a tradition that, at its base, had settled this issue once and for all. Its foundation would be the conviction that Jesus sees the way home with perfect clarity, a clarity that yet eludes us. Therefore, its whole attention would be on two things: first, discerning, to the best of our ability, exactly what Jesus was trying to say; and second, following (again to the best of our ability) what he asked us to do. Imagine a community of students, teachers, healers, study groups, and centers all over the world united in these two things. Imagine the strength that would come from knowing that you are part of such a united effort. And imagine the support and guidance that this tradition could offer, through a variety of crucial roles. You would have access to a mentor who could guide you along the path based on her own long experience. Such a relationship could be life changing. When you had healing needs, you would call upon a Course healer with a solid reputation within your local area. When you had mental and emotional knots that you couldn't untie on your own, you would seek the help of a Course-based psychotherapist. You would listen to influential speakers and read respected writers whose teaching was practical and relevant, yet rooted in the value of complete fidelity to the Course. And you would benefit, both directly and indirectly, from a long tradition of Course scholarship, in which a community of schol-

ars delved into the Course, not to parse arcane metaphysical subtleties, but to mine the treasures of the Course's wisdom in order to promote real progress on its path.

And that would be the effect of being part of such a tradition: real progress, the kind of progress that would otherwise remain beyond reach. Out of this tradition would stream masses of, first and foremost, genuinely good people; kind, honest, friendly, mature people. They would be quicker with a helping hand than a spiritual lecture. Through their participation in this tradition, they would have undergone a mental, emotional, and spiritual growing-up that would have raised their character a few notches higher toward the sublime. Then there would be a smaller percentage of students coming out of this tradition who would be genuinely *holy* people, not with a holiness that is starched and pretentious, but with a holiness that is simply a more intense and complete version of "normal" human goodness, a holiness that has the power to work miracles. And then finally, it is hoped, there would come out of this tradition the occasional spiritual giant who would actually shift the axis of history.

At that point, when the Course tradition actually resembles what I have just described, we could safely say that the Course had grown "from infancy into a helper of the world." We could say that it was well on its way to achieving the purpose for which it came.

We at the Circle have seen this tradition as the Course's ideal home in the world for many years now. In 1997, we put it in our mission statement, point #3 of which says, "To help spark an enduring tradition based entirely on students joining together in doing the Course as the author envisioned." In that same year, I wrote a lengthy article featuring the concept of establishing this tradition. Yet lately we have had to face the unavoidable fact that, all these years down the line, we are not getting any closer to "sparking" it, and that the birth of this tradition is simply not happening. Which raises the question: How on earth do we get from here to there?

Finally, a year ago, we had what in hindsight was a blindingly obvious realization. The way to get to the eventual tradition, which spans the globe and endures down the generations, is to *form a miniature version of it and then keep it growing*. That's all it would really take. Great things, as we all know, start from small seeds.

And that, as you may have guessed, was the genesis of the idea for the Circle Course Community (if you haven't yet read about the CCC, you can read a full description [here](#)). I realize that this plan must sound audacious, even grandiose. And for those not in alignment with the Circle's approach to the Course, it will no doubt sound arrogant. But someone has to do this. It simply has to happen. So that's what we are trying to do—start a miniature version of the tradition and keep it growing. We put it right in the community's mission statement: "Dedicated to living *A Course in Miracles* and anchoring a tradition that will carry its light to the world."

To keep the seed growing toward the eventual tree, we plan to introduce many of the key features of the eventual full-blown tradition. For instance, we plan to support, encourage, and ultimately train and certify teachers. We are also putting in place a category for Circle-Affiliated Study Groups—groups that are attempting to follow the Circle's "pure Course" approach. And finally there will be Circle satellites, Course centers whose leaders have been so steeped in the Circle's approach that we are confident that students will receive the same basic teaching there that they would receive at the Circle. In fact, we will be happily announcing the first such satellite very soon. We see these teachers, study groups, and centers as crucial tent poles that hold up the whole tent—for now the tent of our nascent community but eventually the pavilion of the mature tradition.

Of course, we have no way of knowing what will happen to the seed we are planting now. It is definitely germinating—people are joining the Circle Course Community. But will it grow into the eventual Course tradition that I have described? Or will its growth stall or even die along the way? No one really knows what will become of a seed once planted. But we still plant them in the hopes that they will grow to their full potential. And the potential of this seed is simply too immense to make uncertainty about its fate keep us from even planting it.

If you want to see *A Course in Miracles* do what it came here to do, if you have the feeling that Jesus' legacy was contaminated with "error" and "misinterpretation" and you'd like to see us get it right "this time," if you care about the state of humanity and have the sense that the Course really could grow up to be "a helper of the world," then consider joining the Circle Course Community. Consider becoming one of the caretakers of this new seed.

If you would like to read Part I of this series—"Realizing the Promises of the Course: Why We Are Launching the Circle Course Community"—click [here](#).



E-mail your comments to the author at: 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'*.

CIRCLE NEWS

The Circle Course Community launches on January 15!

Tuesday, the 15th is a big day for us, as the Circle Course Community will go live that day. We are eager to begin this experience with all of the community members, who are approaching 100 in number. If you are a member, you will be able to get into the community with your username and password on that day. If you are not, please think about signing up.

We'd like to welcome into the world Michael Robert Perry!



Robert and Nicola are delighted to announce the arrival (only a week late!) of Michael Robert Perry. Born on Friday, January 4th at 8.18pm, Michael weighed in at 8lb 1oz and measured 19.5 inches. He gave his parents a few anxious hours initially as he had some breathing problems at birth (caused by swallowing fluid into his lungs), but he recovered quickly and is doing really well now.

Michael Robert is baby brother to Miranda, Anna and Adam, and is named after Nicola's father, Michael, and Robert's father, Robert.