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A BETTER WAY

Never Correct a Brother's Error?

by Greg Mackie

The "Correction of Error" section in the Text (T-9.III) is a section that confounds many Course students. It is often taken to say that you should never correct a brother's error at any time for any reason. Certainly there are lines in the section that seem to suggest this. This makes Course students reluctant to even say that another person *might* be in error, especially in discussions about Course interpretation. We walk around with this tension in our minds: On the one hand,

all of us feel that there really are times when correction is necessary, but on the other hand we hear the Course whispering in our ear, "Don't correct error." This tension can paralyze us in situations where some error correcting needs to be done. Ironically, though, as reluctant as Course students are to correct error, the one error that many seem eager to correct, citing this section as they do so, is the error of correcting errors.

But does this section really say that you should never correct a brother's error at any time for any reason? I don't think so. To understand what it is really saying, I think we need to examine it carefully and draw from other Course material—especially the sections immediately following—for further explanation. That is what I will do in this article. What I have found is that the section is part of a beautiful Course teaching about how to be a true healer.

Initial reasons for doubting the "never correct error" interpretation

Even before digging into the teachings of T-9.III, there are several reasons to be skeptical about the idea that this section bans all error correcting. First, it is a simple fact of life that human interaction involves some correction of each other's errors, either implicitly or explicitly. From correcting tests in school to honking at a car hurtling into your lane to suggesting a better way to do the accounting, at least some error correcting is simply a human necessity (though we almost certainly do too much of it).

Indeed, refusing to do so can sometimes place people in danger. The Course itself says, "Babies scream in rage if you take away a knife or scissors, although they may well harm themselves if you do not" (T-4.II.5:2). And Robert told me a sad true story about a Course student with a developmentally disabled son who had difficulty walking a straight line. Father and son were hiking on a cliffside trail in Sedona and the father saw that the son wasn't walking carefully or steadily enough. He told the local newspaper later, however, that he didn't want to correct the boy. But this decision led to tragic consequences: The son fell off the cliff to his death. Sometimes, correction simply has to be done.

Second, if Jesus is really instituting a total ban on correcting errors, he sure isn't practicing what he preaches. The entire Course is one long correction of our errors. He frequently corrected Helen and Bill's errors, in an always loving but sometimes blunt way. And he clearly approved of human beings correcting each other's errors as long as it is done in the right spirit. He sometimes instructed Helen and Bill to correct each other's errors; for instance, he once said to Helen, "Tell [Bill] that his delaying tactics are holding him back." And he praised a woman named Mrs. Albert for lovingly correcting Helen's forgetting of her name: "She corrected your error about her name without embarrassment and without hostility....She made the correction *only* because you were inaccurate, and the whole question of embarrassment did not occur to her."

Finally, there are positive references in the Course material itself to correcting a brother's error, as we will see.

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- ◆ 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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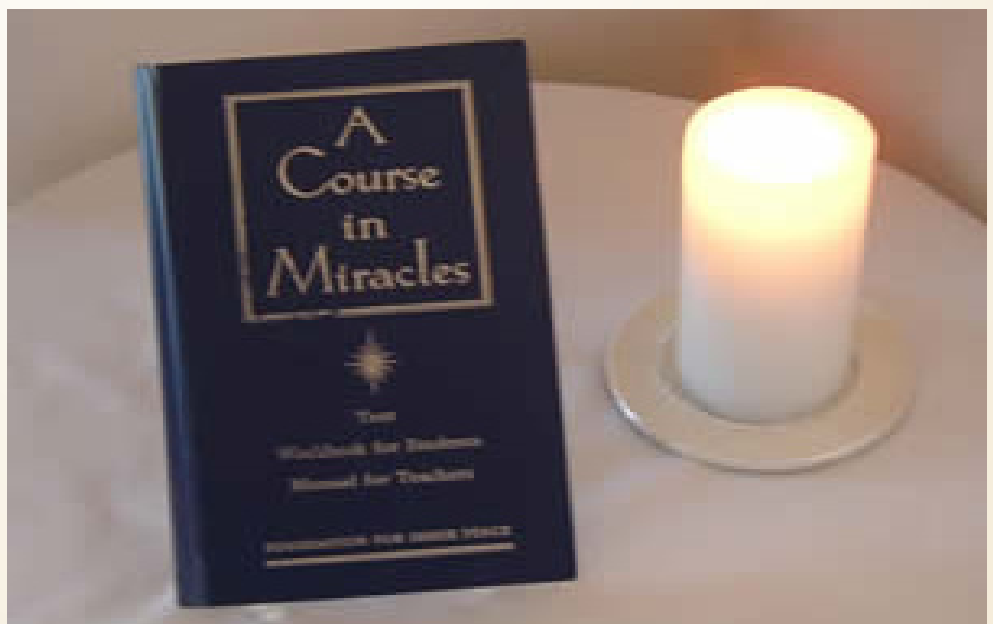
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The message of T-9.III, “The Correction of Error”

Now let’s turn to T-9.III. What does it really say about correcting error? Looking carefully at its teaching, I see a message that can be boiled down to three main points:

1) The problem is that your ego is vigilant for the errors of your brother’s ego, which makes those errors real and thus reinforces the ego in both of you

The problem the section addresses is named in the very first line: “The alertness of the ego to the errors of other egos is not the kind of vigilance the Holy Spirit would have you maintain” (1:1). What kind of vigilance *would* the Holy Spirit have you maintain? This is a subtle reference to the third lesson of the Holy Spirit in Chapter 6: “*Be vigilant only for God and His Kingdom*” (T-6.V.C.2:8). So, this section is contrasting two types of vigilance: the ego’s vigilance for the errors of other egos, and the Holy Spirit’s vigilance for God and His Kingdom—for the truth in our brothers. Thus, though the section does refer to how the ego loves to “point out errors and ‘correct’ them” (2:1), the emphasis in the section doesn’t seem to be on pointing out errors per se, but on the ego’s habit of *looking* for errors to point out—what Workbook Lesson 181 calls “your focus on your brother’s sins” (W-pI.181.2:5).

As a result of this focus, our brother’s errors are *made real* in our minds: “To perceive errors in anyone, and to react to them as if they were real, is to make them real to you” (6:7). We now believe they are real, even though the Holy Spirit knows they are not real. This, I believe, is the import of one of the most confusing lines in the section: “If you point out the errors of your brother’s ego you must be seeing through yours, because the Holy Spirit does not perceive his errors” (3:1). It is confusing because elsewhere the Course very plainly states that the Holy Spirit *can* perceive errors (see, for instance, T-19.III.5:1). How do we resolve this apparent contradiction? I think the resolution lies in the fact that in the Course, “Do not see x” can often mean “Do not see x as real.” For instance, in the *Song of Prayer* we read, “*Do not see error. Do not make it real*” (S-2.I.3:3-4). So, I think 3:1 means this: “If you are vigilant for the errors of your brother’s ego, you must be seeing through your ego, because the Holy Spirit does not perceive his errors as real.”

Making our brother’s errors real in our minds makes *our own* errors real as well:

If you perceive his errors and accept them [as real], you are accepting yours. (5:2)

Accept his errors as real, and you have attacked yourself. (7:2)

The end result of all this is that both our brother’s ego identity and our own ego identity are reinforced. When our ego is vigilant for the errors of other egos, all we see wherever we look is a bunch of egos.

2) The solution isn’t to deny that your brother makes errors on a form level

This is the solution Course students often reach for, but it is definitely not what the section is saying. It gives us an injunction that begins “When your brother behaves insanely...” (5:1). How could you carry this injunction out unless you were able to tell when your brother was behaving insanely? And while the section instructs us to tell our brother he is right, we aren’t being asked to pretend that everything he says is pure gold:

He may be making no sense at the time, and it is certain that, if he is speaking from the ego, he will not be making sense.... You do not tell him [he is right] verbally, if he is speaking foolishly.... His ego is always wrong, no matter what it says or does. (2:5, 7, 10)

If we’re not being asked to tell a brother he is right verbally when he is speaking foolishly, just what exactly *are* we supposed to tell him verbally? Should we just not say anything? Certainly there are many times when this is appropriate; many errors are too trivial to merit mention. But are we to do this *all* the time? If a friend says to you, “I want to commit suicide,” do you stay heroically silent instead of trying to talk her out of it? I think not. I think there is an implication here that you may be called to point it out when someone is speaking foolishly, an implication that will be made explicit in other sections.

3) The solution is to look past your brother’s errors to the truth in him, which shows that error is unreal and thus reinforces the awareness of your true Identity in both of you

Even if we may be called to point out errors in a brother sometimes, the section’s counsel is that to actually undo errors, we must see beyond them to the true Identity of our brother. This is how we tell him he is right:

Errors are of the ego, and correction of errors lies in the relinquishment of the ego.... Your task is still to tell him he is right.... He needs correction at another level, because his error is at another level. He is still right, because he is a Son of God. (2:3, 6, 8-9)

The idea is that even as we see his errors on a form level—like insane behavior—at the same time we look past them to the truth that his errors are not real and he is not an ego: He is a Son of God. We take the function of correction away from our egos and give it to the Holy Spirit, Whose function it is. We accept our true function of healing with His help, and we “heal him... by perceiving the sanity in him” (5:1). In short, we forgive our brother. This decision to forgive and see that our brother is God’s Son enables the Holy Spirit to correct his mind *through* us.

The end result of seeing the true Identity of our brother is that we learn the truth that we too are God’s Son, totally forgiven:

The Holy Spirit in you forgives all things in you and in your brother. His errors are forgiven with yours. (7:4-5)

[The Holy Spirit] will teach you how to see yourself without condemnation by learning how to look on everything without it. Condemnation will then not be real to you, and all your errors will be forgiven. (8:10-11)

The clarification of this message in the following two sections (T-9.IV and T-9.V)

The three points in my summary of the “Correction of Error” section are repeated in various forms throughout the Course material. In particular, they are echoed in the two sections that immediately follow, sections which are clearly meant to clarify and expand on the message of T-9.III. And, crucial for our purposes here, T-9.V makes explicit what I think is implicit in the second point: There are times when it is appropriate to point out a brother’s error, especially when you are in a healing role. Let’s look at some of that material now. (I’ve numbered the three points for clarity.)

T-9.IV, “The Holy Spirit’s Plan of Forgiveness”

1) In this section, the problem is the ego’s plan of forgiveness, in which “you see error clearly first, and then overlook it” (4:4). This doesn’t work because “By seeing it clearly, you have made it real and *cannot* overlook it” (4:6). All it does is the same thing that being vigilant for the errors of our brother’s ego does in the previous section: We make our brother’s errors real and thus reinforce the ego in both of us: “Perceive what he is not and you cannot know what you are, because you see him falsely” (1:5).

2) As in the “Correction of Error” section, the solution here isn’t to deny that our brother makes errors on a form level.

3) Rather, the solution is to *overlook* those errors, a word my dictionary defines as “ignore or disregard (something, esp. a fault or offense).” In this section, overlooking errors means to ignore or disregard them as evidence of who our brother really is. This is the Holy Spirit’s plan of forgiveness, which consists of “looking beyond error from the beginning, and thus keeping it unreal for you” (5:3). By doing this, we see the truth in both our brother and ourselves; we see that we are not egos but holy Sons of God.

T-9.V, “The Unhealed Healer”

This next section shows how the plans of forgiveness presented in the last section apply to two healing roles: the theologian and the psychotherapist.

1) The problem is that theologians and therapists who are “unhealed healers” each practice a version of the ego’s plan of forgiveness, in which you make error real and then try to overlook it. The theologian’s version starts with the conviction that sin is real and then proposes a magical solution to “forgive” it, such as Jesus dying on the cross. The therapist’s version starts with the conviction that the mental errors uncovered in therapy are real—“This is who you really are”—and then proposes another magical solution to “forgive” them: saying that they are just impotent thoughts, so as long as they are not acted out, everything is okay. Both of these magical solutions, of course, just keep the errors in place and thus reinforce the egos of everyone involved.

2) Once again, though, the solution is not to pretend that such errors don’t exist on a form level. On the contrary, in his discussion of the therapist’s role, Jesus makes very clear that pointing out those errors is actually an important part of

the therapeutic process. We are told that “It *can* be helpful to point out to a patient where he is heading” (Urtext version of 7:2) and “There *is* an advantage to bringing nightmares into awareness” (Urtext version of 3:1). These lines look like direct, intentional clarifications of the “Correction of Error” section, as if Jesus is saying, “I know that section may have sounded like you should never, ever correct a brother’s error, but I’m telling you now that as a therapist it *can* be helpful and there *is* an advantage in pointing out the error of your patient’s ways.”

3) But while there is a place for pointing out errors in the psychotherapeutic process, the solution to the problem of the unhealed healer is to do this in a way that shows the errors are unreal—to simultaneously look past them to the truth in the patient. When the therapist points out where the patient is heading, “the point is lost unless he is also helped to change his direction” (7:2). When the therapist brings nightmares into awareness, she should do so “only to teach that they are not real, and that anything they contain is meaningless” (3:1). So pointing out error is only a precursor to the main part of her job: showing that the error is unreal, that this is *not* who the patient really is. The therapist is to look to the true Identity of the patient with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Echoes of this message in other Course material

We see echoes of this same basic message all over the Course material. For instance, in the *Psychotherapy* supplement, the therapist’s role clearly involves correction of the patient’s erroneous beliefs. A major part of his role is “to aid the patient in abandoning his fixed delusional system, and to begin to reconsider the spurious cause and effect relationships on which it rests” (P-1.In.1:2). But to keep from doing this in a way that makes those errors real, the supplement says that the therapist must simultaneously see beyond those errors to the truth in the patient through forgiveness. This is the primary engine of healing, not only for the patient but for the therapist: “The process that takes place in this relationship is actually one in which the therapist in his heart tells the patient that all his sins have been forgiven him, along with his own” (P-2.VII.3:1).

Helen received similar advice in personal guidance about performing psychological tests to assess patients’ mental health. Jesus said that the potential problem with this is the temptation to regard the results of those tests as real, which would reinforce the apparent reality of the therapist’s own mental errors: “As you see him, you will see yourself.” The solution, however, isn’t to refrain from psychological testing; it is an “unfortunate necessity” in this world. Rather, the solution is to simultaneously look past the results of the tests to the truth in the patient, “to recognize that you are *discussing only illusions*, and that this has no real meaning at all.” With this attitude and prayers for her patients, Helen would “call forth and experience a miracle instead,” a miracle that would presumably heal the patient and Helen alike.

We’ve been talking about psychotherapeutic situations here, but the same basic principles apply to intellectual debate, the arena where “don’t correct error” so often comes up in Course circles. For example, Helen once had an intense intellectual debate with a colleague named Jack, and Jesus’ comments on it are instructive. He did see aspects of it as problematic, especially the competitive element exemplified by the victorious Jack writing to Helen that “virtue is triumphant.” However, he didn’t regard the debate itself as improper. On the contrary, he noted that both intellects were “good ones...each communicating exceptionally clearly but on opposite sides,” and that “the virtue lay in the complete respect each of you offered to the other’s intellect.” The problems, in his view, didn’t stem from error correcting in itself, but from Helen and Jack’s failure to simultaneously see past the errors to the truth in each other. While they did respect each other, “neither of you was respecting *all* of the other...The omission was the Soul”—the true Identity that they shared.

Finally, let us not forget Mrs. Albert, whom Jesus praised for correcting Helen’s error about her name “without hostility or embarrassment.” Mrs. Albert, Jesus said, wasn’t upset about the error because she didn’t identify with her name; it was just a meaningless symbol. She made the correction simply because Helen was “inaccurate.” She clearly didn’t make Helen’s error real even as she corrected it, but looked past it to what really mattered.

Conclusion: Correcting your brother’s errors is sometimes necessary, but you must simultaneously look past them to the truth that both of you are not sinful egos but holy Sons of God

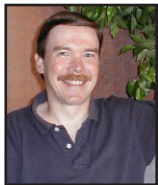
We’ve seen in all of these examples the same basic pattern, the pattern that I believe the “Correction of Error” section is really trying to teach. The problem is that we have a tendency to be vigilant for other people’s ego errors. Our ego is watching like a hawk for the errors of other egos, ready to swoop in for the kill. Unfortunately, when we do this, we make those errors real and reinforce the ego identity of everyone involved. This is the issue the section has with correcting errors: Our *focus* on our brother’s errors keeps the ego fat and happy.

But based on all we’ve seen, the solution is not a simplistic and impossible-to-follow rule that says we must never correct anyone’s error at any time for any reason. There are times when correcting a brother’s error truly is necessary (though there are undoubtedly many times when it is not). But we must learn to do it in a new way. In this new way, we

take a dual stance: Even as we are correcting an error, we simultaneously look past it to the truth in the person we are correcting. Even as our words say “I believe that you are wrong in this particular matter,” our hearts say “I affirm that you are right in the sense that really matters—you are a Son of God.”

What a beautiful and eminently practical picture of how to be a true healer! Yes, we do correct errors when it is loving to do so. We take the scissors away from the baby. We guide our developmentally disabled son so he doesn’t fall off the cliff. We gently point out the pitfalls our patients are falling into. We respectfully engage in intellectual debate. We might even correct someone who gets our name wrong. But all the while, our focus is on what matters most of all: seeing the holy Son of God in everyone. This is what heals our brothers and ourselves. This is what transforms our error correcting from egoic condemnation to loving guidance. Isn’t this better than banging our heads against the wall trying to accomplish the excruciating and impossible task of never pointing out a brother’s error?

What do you think? Let’s talk about this. Send me your feedback. You can even point out my errors.



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

He has been a student of A Course in Miracles since 1991, and a teacher for the Circle of Atonement since 1999. He writes Course Q & A’s and a popular blog on the Circle of Atonement’s website, and teaches the Circle’s weekday Workbook class in Sedona, Arizona (along with Robert Perry). He sees his primary function as helping to develop a tradition of Course scholarship.

“Learn to See These Foolish Applications”

A Discourse by Jesus on Course Interpretation

by Robert Perry

In the previous issue of *A Better Way*, I published an article entitled “Interpretation and the Future of the Course.” My point was that how we approach the interpreting of the Course is absolutely foundational for our entire relationship with it. I then tried to ascertain how Jesus would have us approach the interpretive act and finally envisioned what the future of the Course might be like if we followed his approach.

This topic of interpretation is so crucial that I want to keep it alive, rather than moving on from it. A few days ago I hit upon a way to do that. Greg and I were doing our daily recording for Workbook Lesson 196, and I realized that the second and third paragraphs of that lesson are actually a discourse on Course interpretation. Indeed, they are perhaps the single most important statement we have of how Jesus sees the whole matter. Here is how that discussion begins:

Perhaps at first you will not understand how mercy, limitless and with all things held in its sure protection, can be found in the idea we practice for today. It may, in fact, appear to be a sign that punishment can never be escaped because the ego, under what it sees as threat, is quick to cite the truth to save its lies. (2:1-2)

The “idea we practice for today” (2:1) is the lesson title: “It can be but myself I crucify.” The purpose of this idea is to overturn how we view our attacks. When we attack someone, we see our attack as being like a raiding party that leaves us, goes out and plunders the other guy’s village, and then returns with the booty, leaving us both unharmed and richer. But the truth is that our attacks only end up hurting us. By making us feel guilty and deserving of punishment, they give permission to the “murderer...within” (11:1) to perpetually crucify us in every way it can.

According to Jesus, this idea actually contains “mercy” which he describes as “limitless” (2:1). How so? Because, as he later explains, if you can only crucify yourself, then “you did not hurt the world, and need not fear its vengeance and pursuit” (9:2). That should be a massive relief in itself. Further, if you did not hurt the world, then you need not fear God punishing you for it. “Nor need you hide in terror from the deadly fear of God” (9:3). So this idea should really feel like a kind of blanket absolution. It should feel like mercy. Perhaps its most merciful aspect is that it enables us to stop crucifying ourselves. It enables us to at last be merciful toward ourselves.

Yet Jesus is clearly concerned that “perhaps at first” (2:1) we won’t see this mercy. He is concerned that we will take the idea as “a sign that punishment can never be escaped” (2:2). What does he mean by that? He means that when we hear “When you attack others you really just punish yourself,” we assume, “Well, I can’t stop myself from attacking others, so

I guess I will just keep punishing myself.” It’s like telling an addict that his using is only hurting himself. All he hears is, “Since I know I can’t stop using, I guess that means I am doomed to hurt myself forever.”

Actually, I suspect that this is exactly our gut reaction to this lesson. When you first read, “It can be but myself I crucify,” do you have a positive reaction, a bright feeling inside? Or does it feel dark, maybe even a bit foreboding and hopeless? If the latter, isn’t that because somewhere inside a voice is saying, “You’ll never stop crucifying yourself”?

Why are we seeing the lesson in this dark way? According to our passage, it is because the ego sees the lesson “as threat” (2:2). The ego is all about attack. Yet this lesson has the power to pull the plug on our attacks. Would anyone throw a punch if he knew that punch would miss the other guy and just boomerang back into his own face? So the ego is deeply threatened by the idea that “It can be but myself I crucify.” As it faces the idea, it senses its supports being pulled out from beneath it.

So what does the ego do? It twists the idea around, transforming threat into salvation. It cites the truth to save its lies. As Jesus said earlier in the Text, “Not only does the ego cite Scripture for its purpose, but it even interprets Scripture as a witness for itself” (T-5.VI.4:4). Therefore, the ego is quite happy to quote “It can be but myself I crucify,” as long as it can tell you what it means, as long as it can tell you that, as a hopeless attack addict, you are doomed to crucify yourself forever.

The situation is very straightforward. Now the question is, What is Jesus going to say about it?

Yet must it fail to understand the truth it uses thus. But you can learn to see these foolish applications, and deny the meaning they appear to have.

Thus do you also teach your mind that you are not an ego. For the ways in which the ego would distort the truth will not deceive you longer. You will not believe you are a body to be crucified. And you will see within today’s idea the light of resurrection, looking past all thoughts of crucifixion and of death, to thoughts of liberation and of life. (W-pI.196.2:3-3:4)

The first thing Jesus says is that the ego, by twisting the idea around the way it has, has also failed to understand it. It is not seeing the idea as Jesus meant it. It is *misinterpreting* it.

Then he goes on, “But you can learn to see these foolish applications, and deny the meaning they appear to have.” This is such an important line. By speaking of “foolish applications” (plural), Jesus is broadening the whole issue beyond this particular foolish application and telling us how to deal with *all* of them. He is saying, “Learn how to spot the ego’s misinterpretations of the Course and then deny them, reject them.” This single line could revolutionize the way that we approach Course interpretation.

Then he goes on to say something equally remarkable: “Thus do you also teach your mind that you are not an ego. For the ways in which the ego would distort the truth will not deceive you longer.” The logic here is that if the ego says, “The lesson means this,” and you say, “No, I reject that meaning,” then *you* can’t be the *ego*. If you *override* the ego, how can you *be* the ego? So here you have given yourself definitive proof that you are not the ego.

Isn’t that the whole point of the Course—to demonstrate to ourselves that we are not egos? To awaken beyond our misidentification with the ego to our true Identity as God’s Son? Who would have thought that one way that we do that is to catch our ego misinterpreting the Course and then refuse to let it? Who would have thought that resisting the temptation to misinterpret is a genuine path of liberation from the ego?

As it closes, the paragraph says that by resisting this temptation, we not only prove to ourselves that we are not an ego, but we also see in today’s idea the mercy that is really there. We see “the light of resurrection,” rather than the long shadow of crucifixion. So much flows from that single decision to pull our mind back from the ego’s misinterpretation.

I want to say a couple of things about this remarkable passage in Lesson 196. First, it is extremely close in content to my previous article’s distillation of how Jesus sees the act of interpreting the Course. That distillation consisted of four points:

1. The Course is not meant to be “open to more than one interpretation.” Jesus has a particular meaning that he is trying to convey.
2. He is trying to express that meaning in the clearest way he can, making “every effort to use words which are *almost* impossible to distort.”
3. The lack of clarity, then, doesn’t come from *him*, but from *us*. We are prone to “twisting” his words, “interpreting against” them, almost willfully misinterpreting what he says.
4. To correct for this, we must be willing to “*be very careful* in interpreting.” We must resist the temptation to “read this hastily or wrongly,” and instead read and “re-read very carefully.”

Notice just how similar this is to the discourse in Lesson 196. There, Jesus clearly has a particular meaning he is trying to convey (point #1). But something in us is twisting his words, almost willfully misinterpreting them (point #3). Therefore, we need to consciously correct for that. We need to actively resist that temptation to misinterpret (point #4).

In composing those four points, I was not at all drawing on the discussion in Lesson 196. I had actually forgotten it was there and only happened upon it within the last week. The fact that it so closely mirrors my previous four points says to me that there is something to those points, that they really do capture something at the heart of how Jesus sees the interpretive act.

Second, I believe that this discussion in Lesson 196 is broadly applicable in today's Course community. What I see in the Course community is a widespread tendency to bend the Course towards what I have called miracles boomeritis. And boomeritis is just a contemporary form of narcissism. And narcissism, of course, is the ego; it's the very essence of the ego. In short, I feel like there is this constant gravity in us that wants to pull the Course down to the place where it affirms, excuses, empowers, and even spiritualizes our ego. This is more or less the same situation that Jesus addresses in Lesson 196.

Along with this tendency to interpret the Course as supporting our narcissism, there is such a strong value placed on freedom of interpretation. However we want to interpret it, however we feel guided to interpret it, whatever works for us, because it doesn't really matter anyway, and there obviously isn't one "right" interpretation, and even if there were, how could we ever know what it was? If you spend time with Course students, you hear these things so many times that they become part of the landscape.

So there is this one-two punch here: Interpret it in a way that supports narcissism/interpret it however you want. I'm not saying that everyone does that, not by a long shot. But twenty-seven years among Course students has taught me that this one-two punch is widespread indeed.

What Jesus says in Lesson 196 could not be more different, could it? His whole message there is that we have to spot and resist that one-two punch. We want to give our narcissistic tendencies free rein to interpret however they want. He wants us to swim the opposite way. The very process we want to unleash and empower, he wants us to rein in and correct.

Imagine that every time we opened the book, our mind was filled with what Jesus says in Lesson 196. We thought, "There is some particular thing that Jesus is trying to get across to me here. That thing is pure liberation if I understand it aright. Yet my ego will certainly be threatened by it, and as a result will try to twist it around to mean something that supports itself. It's my job to learn how to catch the ego doing this, so I can reject its misinterpretation. Then I can see Jesus' idea truly; then I can see the liberation it contains for me. Not only that, but then I have proved to myself that I am not an ego."

Imagine an entire Course community swimming in this direction, actively trying to rein in our tendencies to interpret however we want, in order to get back to what Jesus actually meant. How might things be different than they are today? Imagine you yourself swimming in this direction. Imagine that not only the way you intellectually interpreted, but even the way you *emotionally colored* the teaching was as faithful as possible to what Jesus conveyed. How might *you* be different than *you* are today?



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 MAILBOX

Mailbox

In the previous issue (A Better Way #78), I wrote an article entitled “Interpretation and the Future of the Course.” I said it was a sequel of sorts to the boomeritis discussion we have been having in these pages. And I asked for feedback from readers. Below are several pieces of feedback that I received, plus one response to the “Miracles Boomeritis Quiz” (A Better Way #77), which was sent to me but somehow got lost in transit.

From Mary Anne Buchowski:

I can’t even begin to express my gratitude for your recent article, “Interpretation and the Future of the Course” and how deeply moved I was by it.

It corrects the mistaken perception that anyone who seeks to really know how Jesus wants us to interpret his teachings is being “holier than thou” and divisive, sowing seeds of separation in the Course world.

This is not about one person trying to be right, to be the authority; it’s about wanting to be faithful to Jesus and how he wants us to interpret and live his teachings. It’s about letting *him* be the authority! I can’t imagine Jesus ever saying, “Okay, guys, I’m leaving now. Here are my teachings; see them however you want; do with them whatever you want.”

I have had my own share of issues with authority, and even used to pride myself on upholding the slogan “Question Authority,” but Jesus is one authority I don’t want to question. How can anyone but he be the final authority on his teachings? Why would I think that I know better or claim the right to be my own authority on them? Why would I think that such and such a person knows better, even if he or she claims to?

Perhaps this is not really about denying the authority of any one worldly Course teacher, but about denying the authority of the author of the Course! Even as we purport to be following Jesus’ teachings, perhaps we are subtly resisting them by refusing to accept their one meaning. Perhaps encouraging all of these different meanings and interpretations of Jesus’ teachings is just the ego’s way of making sure we don’t really get what Jesus is teaching. Perhaps it’s just the ego, “quick to cite the truth to save its lies” (W-pI.196.2:2). After all its “life” *is* at stake! Perhaps the apparent divisiveness in the Course world is just the ego’s way to ensure separation, thus “proving” that there can’t even be oneness among Course students. “You see; how can these teachings be true if even the students of those teachings can’t get together on them?! I told you you’d be better off following *my* teachings.”

The last part of your article brought tears to my eyes, Robert. Your desire for accepting Jesus as the one authority on his own teachings and for a “community-wide collaboration” to find his one meaning speaks to a deep yearning in me. I am so glad that Jesus loves us so much that he came back to set the record straight. We got it wrong the last time, both by yielding to a worldly authority (the Church) and by splintering off into different groups, and I yearn for us to get it right this time around.

Your article for me—and for others, I hope—is a clear call to join in common purpose, to rally behind Jesus, and take a stand for truth—the truth he is trying to teach us, not our own individual “truths.” Thank you so much, Robert, for sounding this call. My prayer is that it is heard and answered.

Mary Anne,

Thank you so much for your heartfelt words. I’m glad you brought out what you did at the end. People don’t realize that as long as we are each interpreting according to our own rules, each of us, to some extent, will be an island unto ourselves. It’s only when we answer to a common set of data (the words of the Course) interpreted according to common rules, that we can actually join in a common endeavor around this path. I know this can work because, as you know, the Circle has always operated on this principle. We have had a number of teachers and writers here—myself, Allen, Greg, Nicola, you—from various parts of the country and the world. And, as you also know, what has knitted us together has not been a common bending to my interpretation. My opinions don’t actually count for all that much around here. I have to support them just like anyone else. What has knit us together is a common devotion to what is there on the page. That really does provide a basis for us to come together. And that can happen with five people or with five thousand or five million.

From Loretta Siani:

I think you're right on regarding *interpretation*. "Cranking out a careful interpretation the old-fashioned way," carefully reading and rereading, watching for relative and nearby clues, and best of all, listening to Jesus' thoughts as opposed to our own, all adds up to "interpretation" that is meaningful and spiritually salutary.

I say if we're not doing this it's because we're lazy. It's much easier not to study and accept someone else's "interpretation" as our own. However, as teachers of God, I for one think we are called to study...not jump to popular or even unpopular conclusions....study, pray, study, ask questions, "pool our thinking," after all, isn't this every teacher's responsibility?

Loretta,

You're right. There is no shortage of laziness among spiritual students. By temperament, I am actually pretty lazy. I think what happens, though, is that any laziness we come in with tends to be supported by today's spiritual marketplace, which, like the commercials on TV, tends to tell us that we can have it all without any work, or that if we are working, it's a sign that we just don't get it.

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From Janet Hellmann:

I found your article "Interpretation and the Future of the Course" to be helpful in several ways. First, it listed some of the bizarre perspectives on Course interpretation. Secondly, you provided us with a list of some statements from the Course about interpretation and the meaning of words. Perhaps the most significant of these is "I have made every effort to use words that are almost impossible to distort, but it is always possible to twist symbols around if you wish" (T-3.I.3:11). Finally, you offer some suggestions, and it is to this part that I would direct the bulk of my comments.

My husband Robert and I discussed this article at length. These comments include input from Robert, a philosopher of religion and author of the Course-based book *God, Self, and Evil: A Miracle Theodicy*. My input is based on my work as an elementary school teacher with focus on reading instruction.

Interpretation is a cognitive activity that should be preceded by comprehension. It appears to me that many students of the Course are struggling with reading comprehension. Rather than acknowledging and overcoming their limitations in reading, they turn to the bizarre perspectives you listed. They can read the words on the page. The vocabulary is not advanced. But the concepts are abstract. Often the only way to understand is to finish reading the entire Course. Multiple readings of the entire Course are helpful. At other times, some prior knowledge needs to be brought to the text. Considering the errors I have observed, I offer the following partial list of strategies.

Knowing the etymology of words enables comprehension. Knowing word origins facilitates understanding by directing the reader to the literal meanings of words. In the Course Jesus refers to the etymological meaning of *transferred* in T-5.I.6:5-6. "Perception is not knowledge, but it can be transferred to knowledge, or cross over into it. It might be even more helpful here to use the literal meaning of transferred, or 'carried over,' since the last step is taken by God."

Knowing the literal or etymological meaning is not enough. The reader must also be aware of the specific referent for which the author uses the term in question. For example, Jesus uses *mind* "to represent the activating agent of spirit, supplying its creative energy" (C-1.1:1). The word *you* needs particular attention. The distinction between "you who identify with the ego," "you who see your brother sinless," and "you as God created you" needs to be understood. In other words, the referent may change with the context.

Recognizing the author's purpose is an ability that some students seem to lack. Whether this is due to lack of ability or lack of willingness, I cannot say. Jesus' purpose includes providing us with a curriculum that has a unified goal. We are studying a unified thought system. Sometimes students take a sentence that was meaningful in one context and apply it to many others, as if the author's purpose is to give us a series of proverbs or aphorisms. The statements "...forget this course..." (W-pI.189.7:5) and "Trust not your good intentions" (T-18.4.2:1) are just two examples.

In conclusion, while I agree rereading carefully and getting clues from surrounding sentences are helpful suggestions, rereading often needs to be done with the mindful application of reading comprehension strategies.

Janet,

Thank you for this. I agree that reading comprehension methods would be a huge help. I often find myself looking up words in the dictionary, or watching their meanings flex as they appear in different contexts in the Course. I think at the base of this issue is the fact that the Course, as works of English go, is not an easy read. It does take work, lots of work, including lots of rereading, as well as lots of forming and testing (and discarding) of hypotheses. When standing before such a daunting task, I think we tend to take the easy path, as you say, and turn to bizarre, almost magical solutions for unlocking the meaning, solutions that are essentially substitutes for plain old mental elbow grease.

...

From Greg Fillar:

When it comes to interpreting the Course, what difference does it make whether or not a student believes the Source is Jesus? I am well aware of the many statements and remarks, primarily in the Text, which either directly say or simply imply that Jesus “dictated” (channeled) the work to Helen Schucman. But for me, that belief, held or not is, overall, irrelevant. This doesn’t mean that I’m not interested in the topic of authorship, but it does mean that when it comes to interpretation of the Course, who wrote it is a moot issue for me.

I’ve just read George E. Fandt’s book *Beyond Christianity to the Christ*. In Chapter 6 (“Spiritual Libraries”), as well as in other places, Mr. Fandt discusses the Course. In this chapter he makes some very good observations about the significance of the belief that Jesus is the author of the Course. He is quite blunt when he says, “I believe the course suffers because there are those who attribute its authorship directly to Jesus.” I find myself quite in agreement with his arguments against believing in its literal authorship by Jesus. But again, believed or not, I fail to see the importance of this belief with respect to learning what the Course has to teach.

Curiously, I believe I learned about Mr. Fandt’s book on Circle’s website. If so, then I would assume that you have read the work. And if you haven’t, you may want to read Chapter 6 at a minimum.

This brief message does not give adequate explanation of my position on the topic. So let me add one more observation from Mr. Fandt’s book that I think makes the point of my concern about authorship very well indeed:

...when conveying truth through personality, the channeler behaves as a stained glass window, contributing its own colors. A great deal of [channeled material] is attributed to an external authority or source and is presented as if the consciousness of the individual channels were not involved; however, I believe there is no such thing as an ego functioning as a perfectly clear channel. (p. 181)

Thank you for initiating this lively discussion. I will continue to follow it in forthcoming issues of *A Better Way*.

Greg,

I think it does make a difference if you believe the source is Jesus. Of course it does. Imagine you are learning guitar, and in one scenario your teacher is Andrés Segovia and in the other it’s the amateur guitarist from next door. Even if they are taking you through the same material, you will approach their teaching quite differently and experience it differently. That’s not to say that the author of the Course really is Jesus (a difficult thing to establish). It’s just to say that we can’t sidestep that issue by saying it doesn’t matter. And we also can’t sidestep it by saying that the channel always colors things. Maybe in this case the channel didn’t, or did so very minimally.

But all of this is really beside the point of my article. The main point of my article is that how we interpret the Course matters, and that we should interpret it in the way that the author thought we should. You could go through my article and every time I say “Jesus” substitute “the author,” and the same points would be made. Whoever the author really was, surely if we are following his course as our guide, then we should interpret it in the way he suggested. That’s really all I’m arguing for.

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From Steven Lanigan:

Just finished reading *A Better Way* #78, “Interpretation and the Future of the Course.” Loved your observations, such as that we currently have so many “chiefs/cooks” that Jesus’ voice is in danger of being lost in the crowd. Also where you pointed out how Jesus, during the scribing process, frequently corrected “innocent” attempts to “muddy” a passage’s meaning, by firmly steering it to a *single* meaning—his intended meaning, sometimes over Helen’s recurring protestations that Jesus was thereby being “judgmental.” (*Accuracy* and *clarity* don’t leave our protesting egos any of the interpretive “wiggle-room” they thrive on!)

Another of your comments that really hit home for me was where you said, “I believe we are all hurting over the distressing lack of agreement about what the Course says... We may never actually feel so alone as when we are in a room full of other Course students.” Extremely poignant.

And I strongly feel that whenever we actually chronically *discourage* discussion and courteous disagreement amongst ourselves, it serves only to “protect,” not truth, but beliefs we inwardly know run *counter* to the Course. Otherwise, why *not* be willing to first be mutual “good listeners,” followed by faithfully consulting the *Course* for answers to questions raised? Otherwise, so akin to, say, a student enamored of the school’s “*uniform*,” but who dislikes getting his/her “answers” from the assigned *textbook*!

I loved Amy Speech’s feedback. “This isn’t about getting to a state of inner peace so I can go around being blissful in the midst of all the suffering.... If a bunch of us are wandering around calling ourselves Course students...coming across....as self-absorbed, flakey, and out-of-touch...if we are withdrawing from the suffering...and the world’s problems...we actually serve as barriers to it [the Course.] We *add* to the problem, in ways that could be devastating...” Bravo, Amy! I don’t think I’ve ever heard it put any better, and wish your response was a “must-read” for all Course students.

Certainly, the sooner we get over our misapprehension that concern for “*correct* interpretation” is *judgmental* in the *negative* sense (attempting to “judge” the “reality/worthiness” of God’s children), the sooner the Course community as a whole will hopefully prioritize seeking only *Jesus*’ intended meaning for his course. A hurting world awaits our doing nothing short of that as our *starting* point.

Steven,

I appreciated a number of the points you made. I especially appreciated you pointing out how we tend to discourage the interpretive act itself. We view the discernment involved as judgmental, or the discussion and disagreement involved as combative and unspiritual. That has always struck me as odd. At that point, you are wrong no matter what interpretation you arrive at, even if you arrive at the right one. You are wrong simply because you are trying to find the right interpretation and emphasizing the importance of the right interpretation. At that point, as you imply (and as Mary Anne said earlier), it’s as if the enemy we are defending against here is that right interpretation. It’s as if that is the threat that we have to keep away. What a strange perspective. I actually plan to explore this very point more fully in the next issue. So I’ll hold my tongue until then.

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From Joyce Bunton:

Ever since I was introduced to ACIM in 1983 I have had the privilege of being on my own with my studies of it. I didn’t have a “teacher.” I began teaching it in 1985 due to being asked by my Yoga students—they wanted a way to live the kind of life which I led and although I didn’t consider myself a teacher of the Course I followed its guidance by doing what was asked of me by my brother. This gave me the impetus to take time out of my life to dedicate myself to studying what was on the page. It meant reading and rereading over and over again—my mind would switch off, I would fall asleep, I’d need to wash the windows, but reread I did and still do. I still do, not to reinterpret or reach another level, but merely to remind myself of the thoughts that I know I want to have when I seem to get caught up in the ego’s thoughts. I need to remind myself of the Course’s central teaching of innocence and forgiveness.

I absolutely trust Jesus words, and trust that HS will correct my mistaken thoughts. It’s all there in ACIM. How could I possibly try to interpret it from my wonky mind? If I’m having a challenge and am not at peace, it’s because of my wonky thinking. If I had the answers in my wonky mind I wouldn’t need ACIM. I do have the answers, but they were so blocked by all of my metaphysical and theological conditioning that my time was spent in conflict. I decided to give up all my previous understanding of what things meant and brought them under the auspices of ACIM.

My single-pointed stance has brought challenges—some of my group members don’t like it. However, Truth, or the

right-minded road to Truth, can not be harmed by challenge. My only function is to love those who want to deny what “it” says on the page, and see their innocence. I have no reason to enter into their “debate” and I continue the process of forgiveness which is at the heart of ACIM. I just keep suggesting that they might want to read or reread the book. I could never have understood ACIM without reading and rereading, and doing exactly as it requests. I needed to humble myself—confess that I didn’t know how to find the peace, joy, and the light that I so knew was what I wanted to return to. Giving up my own thoughts was not easy, but absolutely necessary, so I understand the reluctance of those who want to hang onto their thoughts. My compassion for them emphasizes my compassion for myself, and allows me to forgive myself more easily all of my own misthoughts and need for self importance and separation.

When forgiveness becomes a habit it takes on a naturalness which is very unlike the conflict of the past. The option to “not forgive” is just such a waste of time and denies the peace of God.

ACIM has allowed me a happiness which had eluded me—but I had to *want to be* what it promised me, then *do* what it asked me to do, in order to *have* what it promised me.

So thank you Robert for your article. I relate and concur.

Joyce,

As you know, I fully agree with the need to read and reread and stick with what’s on the page. However, on the other hand, I find that I need to combine that with a constant openness to what’s there but what I haven’t seen yet. I think it’s vital to assume that even if we are being true to what’s on the page, there is so much of his vision that still eludes us, even on that very page. I feel that the Course is full of undiscovered treasure, treasure that is standing right in front of us, if we have eyes to see. So when I read, I tend to keep my wonky mind busy, looking for the treasures I haven’t yet discovered, the ones that are hiding in plain sight, if I will only pay attention to the clues.

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From Margaret Stuart:

I have been wanting to write to you for some time about the boomeritis quiz (“Miracles Boomeritis Quiz,” *A Better Way* #77), but either found myself with some time but without my quiz results, or had my quiz results but no time to write. Now, finally, I am taking the time, and I have my results with me.

In general, I found the newsletter took me a long time to read and digest. I must admit, I think that I am still trying to determine that if the way I am living or following now with my life is truly the way appointed me. It isn’t meant for us all to be Mother Teresa, is it? I mean that perhaps our own Westernized middle class life, with its seemingly “normal” challenges is the “appointed way,” and we need to just focus on the Course’s messages through living it, with our brothers that we encounter. At least until I get a better awareness, that is what I am doing. I would appreciate any thoughts you or Greg Mackie (who actually contributed this—and I understand is a marathon runner) might have on this approach.

Now, to the boomeritis quiz. I scored a 12. Half of those points came from questions 29 (“Any time we start talking about differences and disagreements, we are in ego. The truth sees no differences, only oneness”) and 31 (“Only the ego wants to be right, and only the ego calls something wrong. Spirit is beyond such distinctions, which of course are just judgments”) alone, which I found interesting, as they all relate to the ego. This, then gives me the opportunity to be aware of these perceptions, and to take further steps to work on keeping/getting boomeritis out of my study. Thank you for the quiz, it is now and can for the future give me a good checklist of sorts to evaluate my level of boomeritis, as time and my study progresses.

Margaret,

Hi, this is Greg. Thanks for your comments in the boomeritis quiz. I wanted to address your question about the “appointed way,” which I’m guessing comes from my recent articles about finding our part in God’s plan for salvation. I think that on the level of content we are all called to be like Mother Teresa (though this will take time and practice, of course). On the level of form, it is such an individual matter; everyone’s particular function is different, and stepping into it is an ongoing process. I’m still learning more about mine every day.

I think that to find our “appointed way,” our special function in God’s plan for salvation, we need to do two main things: 1) Devote ourselves to daily walking the Course’s path as Jesus laid it out. This is the foundation for whatever

function we have. 2) Continually ask for guidance about our function, and move in whatever direction we feel we are led, trusting that more will be revealed as we progress. I do think that for many of us, our special function will be in the context of a “Westernized middle class life.” Mine certainly is. Yet at the same time, I believe that many of us will be called to be far more actively helpful to others than we have been so far. Jesus really wants us to be miracle workers. But the form will certainly vary from person to person, and we really need to tune in to our guidance to find out what it is.

RECENT WEBSITE POSTINGS

Here are some of the articles we have recently posted on our website:

Course Meets World Commentary by *Greg Mackie*. This month Greg has posted the following commentary relating *A Course in Miracles* to a topic “in the news”: “The Gift of Forgiveness” [Read more](#).

Questions and Answers by *Robert Perry* and *Greg Mackie*. Robert and Greg posted answers to several questions this month: “Do all holy relationships start out as conflict-filled special relationships?”; and “What is the Course's process for healing our minds?” [Read more](#).