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A BETTER WAY

What Is the Meaning of Love?

by Robert Perry

There is a powerful scene in the movie *Forrest Gump*. Forrest, who is mildly retarded, has been in love since childhood with Jenny, whose abuse by her father has left her psychologically damaged. At one point Forrest tells her he loves her and she quickly responds, “You don’t know what love is.” In her mind, his low intelligence makes him incapable of truly understanding love. Later in the story, Forrest asks her if she will marry him. When it’s clear she is not going to say yes, he says, “Why don’t you love me, Jenny? I’m not a smart man. But I know what love is.” By the time the movie is over, you realize that, more than most of us, he *does* know what love is.

What exactly is love? One of the most well known lines in *A Course in Miracles* is from the introduction: “The course does not aim at teaching the meaning of love, for that is beyond what can be taught” (T-In.1:6). Most of us take that line to mean that the Course does not offer a verbal definition of love, for its real meaning is beyond words. Yet to really understand that line, we need to interpret it in light of related discussions in the Course. As it turns out, we are not lacking for related discussions. The meaning of love is a theme that runs throughout the entire Course, being discussed or mentioned in thirty-six paragraphs (this includes one in the *Psychotherapy* supplement).

When we look at all these references, one thing becomes perfectly clear. The phrase “the meaning of love” does not refer to a verbal definition of love. It refers to understanding what love really is. Thus, when the Course says, “You do not know the meaning of love” (T-12.V.6:1), it means that you don’t understand love. To reverse Forrest Gump’s statement, you don’t know what love is.

Indeed, the Course echoes Jenny’s statement about Forrest. It not only says we don’t know what love is, but it then connects that with a mental disability. First it says, “You have learning handicaps in a very literal sense” (T-12.V.5:1). I assume “learning handicaps” is what we today call “learning disabilities,” which doesn’t refer to low intelligence but rather to specific difficulties in learning (like dyslexia). Then it says, “You do not know the meaning of love, and that is your handicap” (T-12.V.6:1). Translated: You don’t know what love is, and in the grand scheme of things, that is a profound mental handicap.

To say you don’t know what love is, of course, is a far weightier accusation than saying you are unable to compose a good dictionary definition of love. In the plainest possible language, the Course is saying *you don’t know how to love*. Who wants to accept that? Imagine how you would feel if one day you realized, “I don’t know how to love. I don’t know what love is.” Would anyone enjoy that realization?

Let’s begin, then, by exploring why the Course says we don’t know what love is. And then, once we have learned what love is *not*, we will be in an excellent position to understand what it *is*.

Our love is special; it attaches itself only to certain people and thus excludes others

Perhaps the most basic characteristic of human love is that we reserve our love for certain people. Our love is, to use the Course’s term, *special love*. We love a particular person due to characteristics special to that person. We decide—automatically or through great deliberation—which person is able to meet our needs best, and to that person goes our love. This characteristic of love is not something we generally question. In our eyes, it is simply the nature of love.

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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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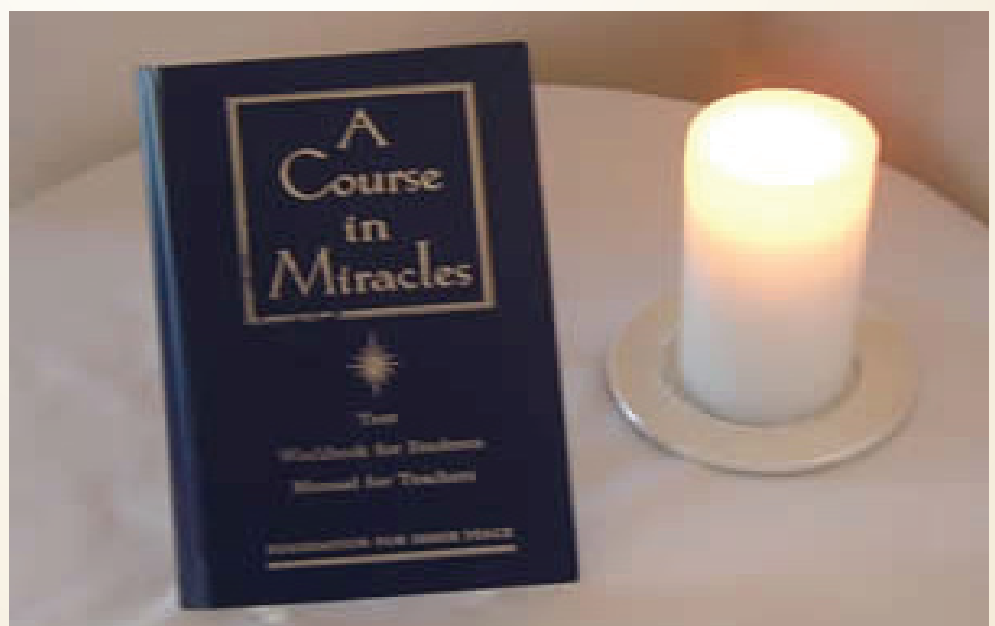
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Yet in the Course's eyes, this is decidedly *not* the nature of love. Indeed, the fact that our love is directed at particular people is the Course's main problem with what we call love. This is why a third of the paragraphs that discuss the meaning of love appear in the special relationship chapters—Chapters 15 and 16 of the Text. As a result, we could largely boil this whole topic down to one short statement: The meaning of love is that *love is not special*.

You cannot love parts of reality [particular people] and understand what love means. If you would love unlike to God, Who knows no special love, how can you understand it? (T-15.V.3:1-2)

Why is special love not really love? One answer, seen in the above passage, is that that is not how God loves, and, as the Course says, "Love has no meaning except as its Creator defined it by His Will" (T-16.VI.1:6). Yet there is another answer that is perhaps more accessible, which is that special love combines love with elements that contradict love. We can see that in these two passages:

To believe that *special* relationships, with *special* love, can offer you salvation is the belief that separation is salvation. (T-15.V.3:3)

In Heaven, where the meaning of love is known, love is the same as union. Here, where the illusion of love is accepted in love's place, love is perceived as separation and exclusion. (T-16.V.7:7)

Both these passages say that special love is "separation," with the second one adding that it is also "exclusion." What this means is not exactly a mystery. Special love says, "I want to join with you, but I want to be separate from them. I want to include you but exclude them."

We don't see a contradiction here. We think, "I love this particularly lovable person but not that clearly unlovable person. What could be more natural?" But the Course sees it subtly differently. Its perspective is not just that *we* both love and hate, but that *our love* both loves and hates. Our love for the one person simultaneously says, "You others, stay away, you're not welcome. You are rejected." Our love beckons with one hand and pushes away with the other.

Do you see what this means? It means that our love has become an *internal contradiction*. It has become a strange mixture of hate and love. As the Course puts it, it has become a *hateful love*. "The demand for specialness, and the perception of the giving of specialness as an act of love, would make love hateful" (T-16.V.9:3). Being an internal contradiction, our love has actually become a patch of nonsense: "Who can understand a double concept, such as... 'hateful love'?" (T-27.III.1:9). This is why we do not know what love means—we think that a hate-filled love can still *be* love.

As students of the Course and seekers of God, we probably think, "I do love, but my love is too limited. I need to expand it to include more people, so that it will someday include everyone." The Course would agree with the basic sentiment here, but register one crucial disagreement: We do *not* love, not yet. Love that includes everyone is the only thing worthy of the name. Limited love is not love. As the Course says, "Its total lack of limit *is* its meaning" (T-18.VIII.8:2).

Our love attacks even the one we "love"

At this point, we might think, "Well, yes, my love does include a kind of hate, or at least rejection, toward people other than my loved ones. But at least my love is truly loving toward those loved ones." Here again the Course would differ. It points out a number of ways in which our loves attacks even the ones we love.

First, our love is about gaining specialness, and specialness is competitive and cannot share:

Specialness can never share, for it depends on goals that you alone can reach. And he must never reach them, or your goal is jeopardized. Can love have meaning where the goal is triumph? (T-24.I.6:5-7)

In the end, human love is generally a quest to feel special. Isn't that the high we are all seeking? Yet specialness is about being above others. As such, it is inherently competitive; it is inherently about triumph. And when it comes down to it, we want that triumph for ourselves alone. We try to tell ourselves otherwise—that we *can* share this goal with our partner, that together we can be above others, together we can triumph. But can we really keep this competitiveness from entering into our relationship? Can we really resist turning on our partner the weapon of triumph that we have aimed at others? And can love be real where competition has entered in?

Second, our love is primarily about taking; it demands sacrifice from the other:

They come together, each to complete himself and rob the other. They stay until they think that there is nothing left to steal, and then move on. (T-22.In.2:6-7)

I think we all recognize the truth in this rather blunt passage, although we can perhaps see it more clearly when we are on the receiving end. We may think our own mode is one of constant giving, yet it is quite clear to us that our partner is frequently taking. Even when we recognize our own taking, however, we often count it as part of love. Why shouldn't I require you to give to me? Why shouldn't I demand that you sacrifice for me? Isn't that the proof you love me? Not surprisingly, the Course calls this out for the contradiction it is. Yet despite the obvious contradiction of a demanding love, the Course says this idea has profound influence, being the very heart of the ego: "Each form [the ego takes is] but a cover for the one idea that hides behind them all; that love demands sacrifice, and is therefore inseparable from attack and fear" (T-15.X.6:7).

Third, our love views giving as a sacrifice, and thus gives only conditionally, only to guilt the receiver into giving back:

He is not in love with the other at all. He merely believes he is in love with sacrifice. And for this sacrifice, which he demands of himself, he demands that the other accept the guilt and sacrifice himself as well. (T-15.VII.7:4-6)

Let's be honest: We do usually experience giving as a sacrifice. This is shown by the fact that we constantly count the cost to see if we can afford it. And we constantly gauge the likely outcome, to see if our costs will be recovered. In the Course's eyes, this is the surface evidence of a darker underlying program: We sacrifice for another person to induce guilt in that person, so that in order to pay off that guilt, he or she will sacrifice for us in return. The Course makes the obvious point: "No one could interpret direct attack as love. Yet to make guilty [by 'giving' in this sense] *is* direct attack" (T-15.VII.6:4-5). Can we really make sense of an "attacking love"?

I could continue to add other categories onto this list. For example, the Course says that we equate love with bondage, with chaining another to us through guilt. "What makes another guilty and holds him through guilt is 'good'" (T-15.VII.8:8). It says that we see love as empathizing with suffering, yet this reinforces that which is capable of suffering in the other, which therefore weakens that person, "and to weaken is always to attack" (T-16.I.2:5). It says that our love relationships are not so much ends in themselves, but just our attempt to find an island of refuge from all the hate in our lives, to find "a haven in the storm of guilt" (T-16.IV.3:1). It says those same relationships are expressions of vengeance on past partners and even on our current partner (T-16.VII.2-5), which means we are acting out a *vengeful love*.

But I suspect you get the point without me having to multiply examples. The point is that even toward our beloved, our "love" is fatally fused with elements of hate. We have equated love with triumph, non-sharing, taking, demanding, conditional giving, making guilty, bondage, weakening, attack, and vengeance. Can anyone call that love? What can we conclude but that we don't know what love is?

Does this mean we are so incapable of love that we only hate, period? Jesus actually addressed this with Helen and Bill, in a way that affirmed the love they did have for each other, while retaining his central point: You do not know what love means.

You have no idea of the intensity of your wish to get rid of each other. This does *not* mean that you are not strongly impelled *toward* each other, but it *does* mean that *love is not the only emotion*. Because your love has become more in awareness, the conflict [in you between love and fear] can no longer be "settled" by your previous attempts to *minimize* the fear....

You do not realize how much you hate each other. You will not get rid of this until you *do* realize it, for *until* then, you will think you want to get rid of *each other* and *keep the hatred*. Yet if you are each other's salvation, what can this mean except that you *prefer* attack to salvation?...You *do* hate and fear each other, and your love, which is very real, is *totally* obscured by it. How can you know the meaning of love *unless* it is total? (*Absence from Felicity*, p. 309)

When "*love is not the only emotion*," when our love is mingled with fear and hate, we cannot "know the meaning of love." The love we feel becomes a feeble echo of the real love that lies deep in our nature, the real love that has become "*totally obscured*" by the fear and hate.

What is love?

We are almost in a position to answer the title question: What is the meaning of love? Workbook Lesson 127, “There is no love but God’s,” holds the key. Interestingly, this is an entire lesson about the meaning of love. It mentions “love’s meaning” or “what love means” eight times. Further, it is “the largest single step this course requests in your advance towards its established goal” (W-pI.126.6:5). Surely the combination of these two features is not an accident. In addition, if we pay attention, this lesson tells us exactly what love really is. Here are the opening two paragraphs of that lesson:

Perhaps you think that different kinds of love are possible. Perhaps you think there is a kind of love for this, a kind for that; a way of loving one, another way of loving still another. Love is one. It has no separate parts and no degrees; no kinds nor levels, no divergencies and no distinctions. It is like itself, unchanged throughout. It never alters with a person or a circumstance. It is the Heart of God, and also of His Son.

Love’s meaning is obscure to anyone who thinks that love can change. He does not see that changing love must be impossible. And thus he thinks that he can love at times, and hate at other times. He also thinks that love can be bestowed on one, and yet remain itself although it is withheld from others. To believe these things of love is not to understand it. If it could make such distinctions, it would have to judge between the righteous and the sinner, and perceive the Son of God in separate parts. (W-pI.127.1-2)

Notice all the things here that love is not. I see five different categories of what love seems to be but isn’t:

1. Love has no different kinds; you cannot love one person one way and another person another way.
2. Love does not change with changing circumstance; you cannot love at times and hate at other times.
3. Love has no degrees, no varying amounts of intensity.
4. Love has no levels; it does not range from lowest love to highest love.
5. Love has no separate parts; it does not make distinctions between people, giving itself to one person while withholding itself from another.

What do all of these categories have in common? They all see *differences within love*. Isn’t this essentially the problem we have seen all along? Throughout, we have seen love mixed with something different, with hate, separation, exclusion, attack, bondage, etc. That, too, is undoubtedly the problem with the above five categories. In other words, the differences within love exist only because *love has been combined with something different*. That is quite clear with a couple of the categories—the second and fifth—which are openly about combining love with an opposite. But it is almost certainly true with the other categories as well. For instance, you only get *degrees* of love (#3) when there is a spectrum stretching from the most intense love to the most weak and mild love, such that at the mild end is a love so relatively indifferent that it isn’t all that loving. Similarly, you only get *levels* of love (#4) when there is a spectrum stretching from highest love to lowest love, such that at the low end is a love that is so selfish and animal that it too isn’t all that loving. Again, you only get differences within love when you inject into it unloving elements.

The reason I’ve spent so much time on what’s wrong with our love is that once we understand what love is not, that automatically tells us what love *is*. What is wrong with our love? It combines love with elements of hate. It makes the opposite of love *part* of love. Our love thereby becomes a hateful love, an attacking love, an exclusionary love, a selfish love, a fickle love, a demanding love. Our love becomes a walking contradiction.

What, then, is real love? It is, quite simply, an *unmixed* love. It is a love not combined with anything else. It is *pure* love. Lesson 127 says it as plainly as possible:

Love is one...It is like itself, unchanged throughout. (W-pI.127.1:3, 5)

Here is the key to the meaning of love: “It is like itself.” Everything in it is love. It contains nothing else. It is absolutely homogeneous. It is the same throughout. Every part of it is like every other part. It is *only* love. It contains no elements of hate, for love is not like hate. It is like itself.

This, of course, is how God loves. To distinguish God’s Love from our “love,” the Course says that there are no *gaps* in God’s Love. It says that “the least and littlest gap...in His eternal Love is quite impossible. For it would mean His Love could harbor just a hint of hate, His gentleness turn sometimes to attack, and His eternal patience sometimes fail” (T-29.I.1:4-5). Here is the exact same notion, that real love does not contain any unlike elements. “It is like itself.” That is the meaning of love.

This sounds ridiculously simple, and on a conceptual level, it *is* simple. But on a practical level, it is revolutionary.

Let's look at what is implied by the simple notion that love "is like itself."

Real love is completely impartial and without exception

When we know the meaning of love, our love will not embrace one and reject another. Rather, we will love everyone to the same degree. "You cannot enter into real relationships with any of God's Sons unless you love them all and equally" (T-13.X.11:1). This means that our love is *impersonal*, in the sense that it is not based on attributes that are specific to a particular person. It is a response to something universal in each person. But this love is also *personal*, in the sense that it is not remote or aloof. It really does love each person deeply. The Course often speaks of this love using the words "dear" and "tender." For instance, a Course prayer has us say, "I am he on whom You smile in love and tenderness so dear and deep and still..." (W-pII.341.1:2). Amazingly, another prayer describes God's Love as having a "tenderness I cannot comprehend" (W-pII.233.1:7).

It loves everyone in the same way

We, of course, are used to loving each person differently—as a friend, or a lover, or a child, or a parent, etc. The emotion of love actually differs depending on that person's place in our lives. To put this another way, our love differs depending on the person's degree and kind of proximity to us. Real love, however, has a different premise. It assumes *total* proximity. It is based on the fact that others are literally one with us. Always being a reflection of this total proximity, real love doesn't take different emotional forms. Rather, the same emotion is merely expressed in different physical forms. You love your spouse in the same way as your friend or as your child, which is the same way you love a complete stranger. You just express that love in different ways.

Real love is constant

Each day we watch our love rise and fall with changing circumstances, like a boat on a restless sea. The same person we love intensely in one moment we may be angry or bored with in the next. Our love includes alternations with unloving emotions, which makes it a contradiction. Being only love, real love is perfectly constant, no matter what the outer circumstance. It forever floats serene and untouched above the restless seas of life. As Lesson 127 says, "It never alters with a person or a circumstance" (W-pI.127.1:6)

Real love has limitless intensity

It is natural to us that love comes in different strengths, different degrees of intensity. Yet as we saw earlier, that assumes a love that has been diluted with something else, a love that has been mixed with an opposite. The only way to avoid diluted love is to have a love of limitless intensity. Even the slightest lessening of intensity means that it has been watered down. Unless it is unlimited, something else has been stirred in. The Course therefore describes the love of our true Self this way: "Its love is limitless, with an intensity that holds all things within it, in the calm of quiet certainty. Its strength comes not from burning impulses which move the world, but from the boundless Love of God Himself" (W-pII.252.1:3-4). Real love has limitless intensity, boundless strength.

Real love only gives, gives itself wholly, and only gains thereby

Human love is a constantly changing patchwork of giving and taking. Sometimes it makes demands on our loved ones and sometimes it gives. But its gifts are carefully measured and almost always conditional. They are more bargains than gifts. In contrast, real love "makes no bargains" (T-8.I.1:5; 21.III.9:3) and makes no demands: "Those who see themselves as whole make no demands" (37.2:7). Rather, it sets others free, for "Love is freedom" (T-16.VI.2:1). And it only gives, holding nothing back in the process. "With love in you, you have no need except to extend it" (T-15.V.11:3). In a state of real love, you give all of yourself to each person. This is not a sacrifice meant to obligate that person to give back. Paradoxically, by giving all of yourself away, you are filled up. As the Course puts it, "Like [God], you can give yourself completely, wholly without loss and only with gain" (T-15.VI.4:6). In case we find this giving so extreme as to be unnatural, the Course adds shortly afterwards, "And this *is* love, for this alone is natural under the laws of God" (T-15.VI.5:7).

Real love, once embraced, becomes our only emotion

For our love to not be combined with unloving elements, it has to become the only emotion in us. Remember Jesus'

assessment of Helen and Bill's relationship? He said, "*love is not the only emotion.*" Clearly, he was implying that love must *become* the only emotion. Otherwise, he said, they would not know what love is: "How can you know the meaning of love *unless* it is total?" Can you imagine a state in which the only emotion ever in your mind is the kind of love described here? Of course, joy and peace would also be in you, for they are an inherent part of love. But negative emotions would never appear in the temple of your mind, would never cross its holy space. If, as the Bible says and the Course quotes, "perfect love casts out fear," then a mind filled with perfect love would literally have no room for fear, or any other negative emotion.

The love described in the above points seems unimaginably extreme, beyond comprehension. Yet it is the simple result of cleaning love of contamination by its opposite. That is all it is. It is a love that is "like itself." And what else deserves the name of love? At one point, the Course speaks of power that has been diluted by its opposite: weakness. It says that "weakened power" is a contradiction in terms, and then concludes, "Power is unopposed, to be itself" (T-27. III.1:5). The exact same thing is true of love. Love is unopposed, to be itself.

How do we attain real love?

What are your reactions to the love I have just described? Since I don't know your reactions, I will share mine, which are three. My first reaction is that, if this is love, then I really don't understand love, for my love *is* a mixed bag. It is partial, exclusive, limited, and changing, which means it has been thoroughly sullied and diluted by its opposite. What Jenny said about Forrest applies to me: I don't know what love is.

My second reaction, though, is that something deep in me responds to this concept of love. Something in me is ignited by it. I want this love; I want to receive it and I want to give it. Okay, it is a little scary. Will I be swallowed up by it? Once it comes, will anything be left of me? Yet despite these fears, I think this love answers a universal longing in us. Something deep in our hearts recognizes this love and, upon encountering it, stirs to life.

My third reaction is that it seems unreachable. How on earth can I ever get there? From a certain standpoint, such doubts make sense, for loving this way is not the norm in this world, with us as the stingy exceptions. Rather, the Course teaches that the entire world, including all its laws and principles, was actually designed to obscure the real meaning of love:

No law the world obeys can help you grasp love's meaning. What the world believes was made to hide love's meaning, and to keep it dark and secret. There is not one principle the world upholds but violates the truth of what love is, and what you are as well. (W-pI.127.5:1-3)

Further, if I am thinking of teaching myself this love, then I *should* experience hopelessness. Remember, when it comes to love, I am learning handicapped. And do you ask the learning disabled to design the curriculum by which they overcome their disability?

You do not know the meaning of love, and that is your handicap. Do not attempt to teach yourself what you do not understand, and do not try to set up curriculum goals where yours have clearly failed. (T 12.V.6:1-2)

The Course affirms, however, that we can be taught love's meaning, as long as our Teacher is not ourselves. True, the introduction says the meaning of love "is beyond what can be taught" (T-In.1:6). Yet later, the Course speaks in more nuanced terms of a two-step process, whereby first the Holy Spirit teaches us an earthly reflection of love, and then we awaken beyond this earth to the full knowledge of love.

For that first step, we need two things. First, we need a special curriculum, designed *for* us, not *by* us: "The learning situation in which you placed yourself is impossible, and in this situation you clearly require a special Teacher and a special curriculum" (T-12.V.5:4). For us students of *A Course in Miracles*, that curriculum is the Course itself. It is a curriculum carefully designed to get through all of our denseness and resistance and actually teach us the meaning of love. Indeed, the Text tells us "this is a course on love" (T-13.IV.1:1).

Second, we need holy instants, instants in which we step out of our normal state of mind. It is in those instants that the Holy Spirit can most fully teach us the meaning of love. The Text tells us, "The holy instant is the Holy Spirit's most useful learning device for teaching you love's meaning" (T-15.V.1:1). And the Workbook is full of lessons that provide practical instruction in how to experience such holy instants. Lesson 127, in fact, is one such lesson. It asks us to take two practice periods of fifteen minutes each, in which we open our minds, withdraw the value we have placed on the

world's "meager offerings and senseless gifts" (W-pI.127.8:4), and call to God, asking His Voice to teach us the meaning of love. And God will respond, it says:

He will shine through your idle thoughts today, and help you understand the truth of love. In loving gentleness He will abide with you, as you allow His Voice to teach love's meaning to your clean and open mind. (W-pI.127.9:4-5)

However incapable of love you seem right now, the Course promises that if you follow its special curriculum and special Teacher, "you will become an excellent learner and an excellent teacher" (T-12.V.8:6). You will actually learn how to love, and learn it so well that you can teach others. To be more precise, you will learn to give unconditional forgiveness, which is "an earthly form of love" (W-pI.186.14:2). "In this form," the Course says, "you can fulfill your function even here, although what love will mean to you when formlessness has been restored to you is greater still" (W-pI.186.14:4).

When you have perfectly learned the earthly reflection of love, says the Course, then you will return to heavenly knowledge. All that you learned about love will have prepared you to really *know*, and in that knowledge, your learning will disappear:

Learning is useless in the Presence of your Creator, Whose acknowledgment of you and yours of Him so far transcend all learning that everything you learned is meaningless, replaced forever by the knowledge of love and its one meaning. (T-18.IX.12:6)

This is what you will at last know: your Creator's "acknowledgment of you and yours of Him." Right now you cannot comprehend that limitless acknowledgment, but *that* is what love is.

Yet, of course, this knowledge of love will not be something truly new. It will be the *remembrance* of something we knew from before the foundations of the world. The Course says that we have always known the meaning of love: "there never was a time in which you knew it not" (T-18.IX.12:5). How could it be otherwise? Love is not something we *have*, but something we *are*. "No course whose purpose is to teach you to remember what you really are could fail to emphasize that there can never be a difference in what you really are and what love is. Love's meaning is your own" (W-pI.127.4:1-2).

If love's meaning is our meaning, then loving in the way described here will never become second nature. Rather, one day we will remember it is *first* nature; indeed, our only nature. And that has implications for now. It means that despite our learning handicaps, and despite the length of time we have spent in a handicapped state, somewhere inside, even now, we *do* know what love is.



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

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CIRCLE MAILBOX

Here is some of the feedback we've received about Robert's article in A Better Way #92, "What Is the Soul?"

Another home run with this month's *A Better Way*. It has really helped me out not only on understanding this "life" but in my views of an afterlife.

I've never believed that we retain individual identities after death. I just came back from the memorial service of my sister-in-law Lu, who died after living fifty years with a body shattered by a horrific neurological disease. She died just two years after my brother, and people were saying, "Oh, now she can be with Bob again." I wonder who "she" is and who is "Bob"?

Yet as I understood the Course, death would mean a return to God of that little bit of Spirit within us and it would be, in a sense, unrecognizable in the entity that is God. The idea of an individual "little" soul that is struggling to return to that larger soul gives me a somewhat more comforting idea of my little soul joining God's big one but somehow still being my little soul.

I haven't fully worked out this image yet but I know that in the instant before my death, I will say, "Ah ha! Of course!"

— Ken Huggins

Robert's response:

Thank you for your feedback! Actually, I think the Course's position on death is that we just keep dreaming. After all, death is a physical event, while waking up is a mental event, and is thus the result of a mental decision. Here is a passage that makes that clear:

When your body and your ego and your dreams are gone, you will know that you will last forever. Perhaps you think this is accomplished through death, but nothing is accomplished through death, because death is nothing. Everything is accomplished through life, and life is of the mind and in the mind. The body neither lives nor dies, because it cannot contain you who are life. If we share the same mind, you can overcome death because I did. (T-6.V(A).1)

So death, being nothing, doesn't accomplish anything. It doesn't catapult us into the state in which our ego and dreams are gone and we know that we are eternal. That is only accomplished by the mind, specifically, by sharing the same mind that Jesus had.

So I actually do believe that there is still a Lu after death that may in fact reunite with a Bob. True, those are false personalities (which I think probably expand to a certain degree after death, and so become a bit more full and less false), but I think we only let go of our false personalities when our mind decides to awake. Just dropping this body isn't going to do that. We all know that the mind can hang onto its basic belief structures despite all kinds of physical changes. So why wouldn't it do so in the face of the greatest physical change of all, the dropping of the body?

Anyway, I hope this is more help than confusion in your processing of the topic. And I suspect you're right—that at that instant before death, you will get it. That does seem to happen to people all the time.

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In your *Better Way* article "What Is the Soul?" you speak of this "other part," this Christ Child in us always as something slightly beyond us, even if a part of us. Yet there are moments, moments in which we experience the holy instant, in which that part is not some other part, rather I am that holy Child.

Why not encourage your readers to experience that "other part" directly rather than excite the ego with the idea that it has a divine relative? Why not "I am the Soul, the Christ Child" rather than "I have a Soul"? I am the one who is imprisoned awaiting my freedom, rather than it is imprisoned. Instead of:

Push the door open. Now look at your soul. What does it look like? Does it take the form of a priestess, as in Helen's vision, or does it take some other form? Is it in chains or is it free, or somewhere in between? What is it

doing? How does it look upon you? Ask yourself what you would like to say to your soul, and then go ahead and say it. And finally ask your soul, “What would you like to say to me?”

Why not this: Now allow yourself the recognition that you *are* this Christ child. What do you want to tell this imprisoning ego?

To be honest I cannot escape the conclusion that Jesus is once again speaking metaphorically. Because in truth he wants us to partially identify with both the Christ in us *and* our continuing imprisoned part of the mind in such a way as to motivate us to return to wholeness. In truth there is no middle ground, no pure soul who is imprisoned. That is a contradiction, but it does make a great motivator. We all like to free the innocent and deserving. We like to free the imprisoned children, the caged animals, etc. Jesus is more concerned with our healing than with theological correctness.

It is all a question of identity. If you keep telling your readers that they are an ego looking upon innocence you are just reinforcing the ego identity. Rather, tell them once again that they are the Christ Child. And that will quicken the day that they might actually experience it!

Basically, I don't think you have discovered anything new, except just another example in which Jesus is going all out for the healing of our minds.

— Jeremy Stutsman

Robert's response:

I actually think your ending to the exercise is not a bad idea! Except for your last sentence: “What do you want to tell this imprisoning ego?” You say that Jesus is not concerned with theological correctness. But I am! So let me explain what I believe the theology is here.

*The Course never suggests that we are egos. It consistently speaks of us as sleeping Sons of God. This means that the “you” who thinks, feels, chooses, suffers, and makes mistakes **is** the Son of God, not the ego. Right now, you are the Son of God, but in a curtailed state. That's what sleep is, a state in which your awareness is dim and foggy and in which you hallucinate a lot.*

So in the Course's system, there is already one unquestionable example of a divine being in a state of limitation, and that example is you. The Course's concept of the soul, then, is not some weird anomaly, but a variation on that same theme. The soul is also a divine being in a state of limitation, but unlike you, it remembers its divinity and does not choose against it.

*We can usefully see the soul, then, as a middle point along a continuum. At the top of this continuum is the Son of God in his reality as the Christ. At the bottom of this continuum is a Son of God in the limited state of sleep. That, of course, is each one of us. Then in the **middle** of the continuum is a Son of God also in a limited state, but still quite aware of his divinity and innocence, yet limited by the choices made at the bottom of the continuum.*

Each one of these three characters is you. You are the Son of God in his unlimited reality. You are the Son of God who is still aware of his divinity yet is imprisoned (the soul). And you are the Son of God who is fully asleep and dreams he is a human being called Jeremy. You could visualize it as an upside-down cone. The wide end at the top is the Christ. The narrow end at the bottom is the you experiencing yourself as a human. Then in the middle is the soul, which is in a more expanded state than the bottom end, but does not enjoy the full expansion of the Christ.

*You say that Jesus must be speaking metaphorically, that “In truth there is...no soul who is imprisoned.” Jesus is just trying to motivate us, even if what he is saying is theologically incorrect. I have written about the metaphor approach and someday I expect I will write more. But what I will say now is that that opens the door to the Course meaning whatever we want it to mean, and **not** meaning whatever we **don't** want it to mean. I could announce, for instance, that whenever the Course says “Holy Spirit,” it really means “French fries.” That is obviously an exaggeration—no one is doing something that extreme—but you get my point. Unless the Course encourages us to so breezily decode it in the way you speak of—and it actually encourages the opposite; it encourages us to take it at its word—then I think we need to see the metaphor talk as a simple attempt to change the Course's message.*

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I appreciate your essay about the soul and know it will repay more study. Meantime a question arises: who is it who decides whether to keep imprisoning the soul? There seems to be too many selves:

- the spirit
- the soul
- the ego
- “I” who choose between the ego and the spirit.

“I” seem to be the important one as that is the part we can work with, which makes decisions...but how then can any other part be really the self?
Any ideas on this?

— Richard Laing

Robert’s response:

My response above to Jeremy addresses much of your question, but I will say a bit more. Let’s go back to the upside-down cone I described in that response.

Spirit is the wide end at the top.

Soul is a slightly curtailed version of spirit, aware of its divinity but also in a state of imprisonment.

Ego is not a self, and so really should not be on this list. It is a mistaken belief in who I am. If I acquired delusions of grandeur and thought I was Napoleon, you wouldn’t call my Napoleon delusion a “self” (except in very loose usage). That Napoleon character would not be a living being. It would simply be a delusion. In the same way, the ego is not something I am. It is something I mistakenly believe myself to be. Huge difference.

The “I” that chooses between ego and spirit is spirit (in the words of Lesson 97, “Spirit am I”), but in a state of sleep, a curtailed state in which it has forgotten what it is.

In other words, you are spirit in a curtailed state, having forgotten what you are. This does not refer to your body. And it does not refer to your personality. It refers to the self that you never see (it would be like seeing your eyeballs without a mirror), but that you are; the self that directs your eyes to read these words, the self that experiences the sensation of sitting on whatever furniture your body sits on right now, the self that chooses between ego and spirit—and often chooses wrongly, and the self that feels the disappointment of those wrong choices. That self, that “you,” is spirit, is the Son of God. Not in the future, but right this second. I think that is an incredibly affirming and liberating message, and I think it is absolutely true.

Ultimately, the picture is pretty simple, because there is only one self, really. There is the Son of God experiencing himself in his reality (top of cone). Then there is the Son of God experiencing himself imprisoned by egoic choices though still aware of his divinity (the soul—middle of cone). Then there is the Son of God experiencing himself as a tiny human being (bottom of cone).

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I really enjoyed the insights in your article on the soul. As usual you make a compelling, well organized case. Your insights on the soul also shed light on other ACIM terminology that can have variance among teachers. Who, for instance, do Christ, Self, self, Son, Sons, Child, Spirit, spirit, consciousness, or the pesky pronoun “you” refer to? Is the “you” that chooses between the ego and the Holy Spirit the same “you” that created sickness and death and can abolish both?

When the Text says that “It should be especially noted that God has only *one* Son. If all His creations are His Sons, every one must be an integral part of the whole Sonship,” it becomes clear that at God’s level there is only Oneness (T-2.V.6). We share one Mind and one substance, but there is evidently something that also makes us individually identifiable as part of the Whole for the plural to make sense. That something is attached to how we use our Mind because a huge number of us chose to think differently. In fact we may have stressed that individuality over our Oneness with God and each other to ask for “special favor” (T-13.III.10).

Thinking differently caused us to separate and indulging it caused us to forget we made the problem and become the victim of the world (T-28.II.8). When we separate we diminish by our choice, having excluded almost everything. The Holy Spirit is God’s answer as we dissociate in our thinking. From God’s perspective we are asleep. In our earthly, non-awake state we seem to have a much smaller and individualized soul or spirit. Yet part of us remembers God and is born like a Child as we wander from home (W-182.10). The diminished self is represented in ACIM by the non-capitalized self, spirit, and soul. Consciousness is the receptive mechanism that chooses whether to listen to the Holy Spirit or the ego (CT-1.7)

The “I” in us and the “you” in ACIM is indeed the same deciding mind that chose to think differently from God and does so even now. It has chosen littleness over magnitude, specialness over wholeness. While asleep in our separate thoughts we just are not aware of the power of God we could have. So, the prodigal returns his thinking to be once again with God’s by recognizing the connection with each other. Seeing the unified Son, or Christ, in each other instead of ego judgments, we awaken. As we awaken, the real world is made possible and allows its translation into Heaven.

Thank you, Robert for being such a beacon!

— Harry McDonald

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As I read about the soul, I went from wondering in a theoretical way how I might experience this innocent, pure aspect in my mind, to suddenly realizing, as quite a surprise, that I am already familiar with the effects of an unusual certainty, at times, in my behavior.

When I first encountered *A Course in Miracles*, I “heard” these words in the center of my chest: “You are supposed to do *A Course in Miracles*.” I have never seriously questioned that guidance.

Then when I first met my teacher at a workshop, I surprisingly invited him to stay awhile at my home and visit our city, and perhaps help us with our Course study. My ego immediately informed me how inconvenient this was going to be, and I firmly ignored it. (Despite seeing a “problem,” I felt certainty). “You be quiet,” I said to my doubts. “I’m going to do this.”

There are other examples of this certain voice in relation to my spiritual path, and its calm, almost unquestioned certainty stands out in contrast to my usual “careful” thinking.

When I did the exercise, I didn’t see this person (I don’t visualize much), but later, caught myself in the mirror, and momentarily recognized this kind, loving, certain being which seemed to be like me with zero pretense, and saw a steady commitment to love and wisdom, love that seemed focused on loving me. She didn’t seem chained, but definitely was waiting on me.

Thanks for exploring this with us. For me, it helps with understanding my experience, understanding the metaphor of Lesson 182, which always puzzled me (who is this child, strong but needing my protection?), and it helps me want to identify with and claim this beautiful certainty.

— Barb Hembling

CIRCLE NEWS

“Ask a Circle advisor feature”

Do you have questions about *A Course in Miracles*? Are you pondering your next step in walking the path of the Course? If so, you may wish to contact one of our new Circle advisors, experienced Course students who can lend a hand and guide you to the answers you need. Help is just a click away! Visit our [website](#) and look for the "Ask a Circle Advisor" tab on the right.

New Circle Course Community renewal policy for monthly subscribers

Due to Circle of Atonement staff cutbacks necessitated by these economically challenging times, we will no longer be able to manually renew monthly subscriptions to the CCC. Instead, your membership will be renewed automatically each year, unless you contact us by phone, or [e-mail](#) to request cancellation. You will receive several e-mail reminders prior to your renew date. Thank you for your anticipated understanding and continued support.