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*by Greg Mackie*

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# A BETTER WAY

## **"I Will There Be Light"**

**Reflections on Approaches to Mental Healing, Based on a Transformative Healing Experience**

**by Greg Mackie**

I had a remarkable healing experience recently that truly felt like a miracle: a dramatic reversal in which the darkness which had enveloped me was shined away by the light of truth. This experience gave me a renewed appreciation for the Course's method of healing the mind, a method I'm more convinced than ever really works. In this article, I'd like to describe my experience and share some of the reflections it has engendered regarding different approaches to mental healing. I'll conclude with a few tips gleaned from my experience, which I hope will be helpful to you in your own journey from darkness to light.

### **My experience: from darkness to light**

I've been feeling pretty down lately. I've had a number of setbacks recently in my life, and have been in a dark mood. One weekend a few weeks ago was particularly difficult; I was depressed and ended up spending a lot of time in bed, alternating between sleeping and ruminating on my situation. During my waking periods, I examined my mind; asked God what had brought me to this place; reflected on what I myself had thought, said, and done to bring this state about; prayed for help; and did a great deal of Course practice, trying everything I could find from my "problem-solving repertoire" (W-pI.194.6:2) of Course practices. For a long time, nothing seemed to help.

But after a couple of days of this, something truly amazing happened. In an instant, something in me shifted, and a firm determination to put a stop to all this welled up on me. It's as if something in me said, "Enough is enough!" I remembered that line from the Manual which says that a sick patient could simply rise up and say, "I have no use for this" (M-5.II.2:12). I said to myself, "God loves me, He has a plan for my life, His Will for me is perfect happiness, so I can choose to be happy right here and right now." I had said similar words many times over the past few days with no apparent effect, but for some unknown reason, this time they stuck. I found myself repeating a line from Lesson 73 with newfound enthusiasm: "I will there be light. Darkness is not my will" (W-pI.73.11:3-4). And with that, newfound light replaced the my lethargic darkness and I got out of bed. I felt like the paralytic Jesus healed, rising and taking up my mat and walking.

Since that moment, the newfound light has for the most part stayed with me. Yes, I'm still dealing with the same issues as before, and there are times when sadness and frustration return. I still have a challenging path to walk. But my overall mood remains positive and hopeful, and I'm working to keep that in place with mental vigilance. I feel like I'm moving forward now, not only changing my thoughts but also taking new actions to build the life Jesus wants me to have. It is a whole new beginning. I feel born again.

### **Reflections on my experience**

This experience has got me thinking about how the healing of the mind happens, how we can move the mind from pain and darkness to joy and light. In particular, because I used the Course's approach (however imperfectly) and found

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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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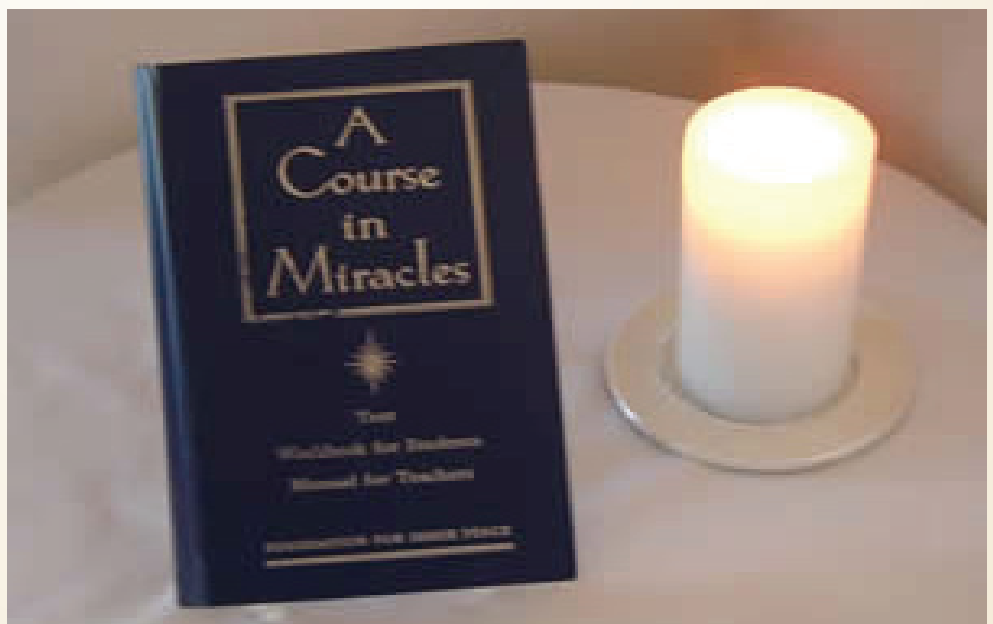
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it to be miraculously effective, the experience has led me to reflect on how the Course's approach compares to the different approaches out there in the spiritual and self-help marketplace. It occurred to me that, speaking very broadly, there are two general approaches to mental healing that are quite popular these days, and the Course brilliantly uses aspects of both in a way that makes the most of their advantages while overcoming their disadvantages. The result, I believe, is a potent recipe for a real and lasting transformation of the mind.

I'd like to expand on these reflections below, first describing the two approaches I've alluded to, and then the Course's approach. But one caveat before I go on: My description of the two popular approaches is very broad and general. It is an oversimplified version of them, intended simply to convey their major emphasis. In actual practice, of course, there is a dizzying variety of approaches to mental healing out there, many of which combine aspects of these two approaches. With that in mind, let's take a look.

### *The affirming approach: "Serenity now!"*

We're all familiar with affirmations, an approach popularized by New Thought churches and New Age authors like Louise Hay. In this approach, the way out of darkness and into the light is to turn your mind firmly away from the darkness and repeatedly affirm the light. As a popular book title has it, "You can't afford the luxury of a negative thought." The law of attraction will bring you whatever you think about, so you must always keep your mind on what you want and banish any thought of what you don't want. You create your own reality; health, wealth, and happiness come through the power of positive thinking.

There are certainly advantages to this approach. God knows we need affirmation that we are more than these little hunks of meat at the mercy of a cruel world—that we are something greater, worthier, more loving and lovable, and far more powerful. We have a deep need to feel truly good about ourselves. The Course itself certainly teaches that we make our own experience with our thoughts (though we emphatically do not create our reality), and it gives us countless affirmations of our true Identity as Sons of God and the gifts that Identity gives us. This approach has much to recommend it.

But there is a potential problem here, one I've tried to capture in the affirmation I've used for my header. Fans of the *Seinfeld* television show will recognize it as the one used by George Costanza and his father Frank in a classic episode. It's funny because both George and Frank are perpetual victims of their own self-defeating neuroses and attacking behavior toward others, vainly hoping that saying (even shouting) "Serenity now!" could somehow magically make their lives better without them actually having to change their ways. "Serenity now!" is a desperate attempt to undo the negative effects of their darkness by sweeping it under the rug.

That, I think, is a big disadvantage of the affirming approach—it can be used in a way that leads to an unhealthy denial of anything regarded as "negative," including not only negative thoughts but our negative behaviors toward others. Of course, I'm not suggesting that everyone who uses affirmations is doing this; I'm simply referring to a tendency. I've seen many examples of this. For example, recently I mentioned to someone that it was possible that something she was proposing might not work, and she quickly said, "I don't even want to put that thought out into the universe." I remember another person who used to quickly say "Cancel! Cancel!" any time I said something he perceived as even remotely negative. And I've seen all too many people who think of themselves as shining lights but are so unpleasant that no one wants to be with them. I'll never forget an e-mail from a guy who said, "My light is so bright, people run away from me."

My impression when I've observed things like this is that these people are deeply afraid of the darkness that lurks beneath their sunny exteriors, darkness so terrifying that it must never be mentioned lest it be brought to life, like Voldemort (aka "He Who Must Not Be Named") in the *Harry Potter* books. And I believe this fear gives us a clue to what is going on here: Those who use affirmations in this way secretly, perhaps unconsciously, regard the darkness as *real* and are desperately trying to make it magically disappear. Of course, they may outwardly profess that the darkness is an illusion, but the frantic way in which they push it away suggests that deep down, they're all too convinced of its reality. It's a classic case of "The lady doth protest too much, methinks."

Thus, it seems to me that the affirming approach can easily turn into something akin to the Course's idea of false forgiveness, where you regard sin as real but then try to overcome its consequences by "forgiving" it, pretending that you can believe in real sin and yet escape its emotional effects. I'm also reminded of a discussion in the *Psychotherapy* supplement (see P-2.In.3), in which we are told that the patient's goal at the beginning of psychotherapy is to gain "magical powers" that will give him a happy life without him actually having to change his self-concept as a victim of the world. (This reminds me so much of George and Frank.)

In both cases you have the same idea: Some kind of darkness is regarded as real and unalterable, but you try to

overcome it by telling yourself that it isn't there, or at least that it has no effect on you. No matter how dark things get, no matter how much your own self-defeating ways and unacknowledged attacks on others keep you from making real progress on the path, just say "Everything is in perfect divine order," and it's all good. Again, I'm not suggesting that the affirming approach is always used this way. But when it is not accompanied by a healthy dose of hard-nosed, no-nonsense examination of the darkness that all too often runs our lives, that darkness will continue to run our lives, no matter how hard we try to deny it and dress it up.

### *The uncovering approach: "Get real!"*

This is an approach made popular by psychologists and the recovery movement. In this approach, what we must do is "get real," face our negative patterns, feel our feelings, uncover the forces that really motivate and drive us. Proponents of this approach often look askance at the affirming approach, for in their eyes, the affirmations popularized by New Agers are a way of denying our truth, of throwing pink paint on the walls of our despair. No, we must face our demons. If we will simply do that, if we will get out of denial and look at ourselves warts and all, we will be on the road to healing.

As with the affirming approach, the uncovering approach does have real advantages. Indeed, the "Unhealed Healer" section of the Course's Text tells us that "There is an advantage to bringing nightmares into awareness" (T-9.V.3:1). The advantage is the flip side of the disadvantage of the affirming approach: It enables us to get out of denial about the darkness that is running our lives rather than trying to run away from it. It enables us to be unflinchingly honest about our negative patterns and painful emotions, which is a crucial step toward undoing them.

But there are problems with this approach too, at least with the way it is often practiced. And oddly enough, a major problem with it is a version of one of the problems with the affirming approach: the belief that the things being uncovered are *real*, that they represent the truth about you, "who you really are." Both approaches, then, agree that the darkness we are trying to overcome is real; they just have different ways of dealing with it. The affirming approach tries to deal with it by pushing it out of sight. The uncovering approach tries to deal with it by looking it full in the face, as if the simple act of looking at it will magically render it powerless over our lives.

This is the big disadvantage of the uncovering approach, one that the Course itself focuses on. In that "Unhealed Healer" section, the Course tells us that this approach is simply another form of the ego's plan for forgiveness, for it involves regarding darkness as real but trying somehow to overlook it anyway. Specifically, the section speaks of how in some forms of psychotherapy, the therapist will uncover the patient's nightmares, make them "real" (I think by regarding them as true representations of who the person really is), but then saying it's okay because those nightmares are only in the mind—as long as you don't let them leak out in your behavior, you'll be fine.

The problem here is that you're still stuck with dark nightmares that represent the grim truth about you. How can this lead to any sort of happiness? How can you feel joy and peace and genuine self-esteem when who you really are is this dark, messed-up creature? As I mentioned, the Course regards this as simply another form of the ego's plan of forgiveness. In the Christian form, the theologian tells you that you are really a dirty rotten sinner, but it's okay because the effects of that sin were wiped out by Jesus dying on the cross for you. In the psychotherapeutic form (at least the form the Course discusses here), the therapist tells you that you are really a wounded, sick, mixed-up person, but it's okay because it's just in your head, and all is well as long as you don't act out your unsavory impulses. In both cases, the attempted healing doesn't really heal the darkness, but simply waves a magic wand in a vain attempt to make the effects of the darkness go away: "A 'miserable sinner' cannot be healed without magic, nor can an 'unimportant mind' esteem itself without magic" (T-9.V.6:6).

The disadvantage of the uncovering approach, then, is the flip side of the advantage of the affirming approach. The advantage of the affirming approach is that we can affirm we are something more; there is a light in us. But in the uncovering approach, we're pretty much stuck with darkness. Again, the uncovering approach has its advantages, and it isn't always used this depressing way. Certainly there are many who combine it with a much brighter view of who we ultimately are. But to the degree that the darkness is regarded as real, even if it is only regarded as a real *part* of us, from the Course's standpoint we can't really affirm that there is light and beauty in us that transcends what we can see. As with the affirming approach, the darkness will continue to run our lives, no matter how hard we try to minimize its effects.

### *The Course's uncovering/affirming approach: "I will there be light. Darkness is not my will."*

The Course's approach is one that it calls "true denial" (T-2.II.2:1) in the Text. This approach, I believe, brilliantly combines the advantages of the two approaches we've discussed, and at the same time overcomes their disadvantages. In true denial, you *face* the darkness directly as in the uncovering approach, but at the same time you *deny its reality* and



affirm the reality of light that transcends the darkness, as in the affirming approach. It is the best of both worlds. You uncover the darkness and look at it without blinders, but at the same time affirm that it is not true, that “Light and joy and peace abide in me” (W-pI.93.Heading).

We can see both sides of this well represented in the Course. On the one hand, we must uncover the darkness. This is crucial, for as the Course says, “No one can escape from illusions unless he looks at them, for not looking is the way they are protected” (T-11.V.1:1). Throughout its pages, the Course constantly and relentlessly uncovers those illusions lurking in the deep recesses of our minds, illusions darker than a psychologist’s worst nightmare. In the Course’s view, deep down we actually believe that we are the vilest scum of the earth, cold-blooded killers who have the blood of Christ and God Himself on our hands. Underneath our smiling exteriors affirming how wonderful we are, the Course tells us this is what we really think:

You think you are the home of evil, darkness and sin. You think if anyone could see the truth about you he would be repelled, recoiling from you as if from a poisonous snake. You think if what is true about you were revealed to you, you would be struck with horror so intense that you would rush to death by your own hand, living on after seeing this being impossible. (W-pI.93.1:1-3)

We can’t avoid looking at this; we must look squarely at the murderer within (W-pI.196.11:1), because if we don’t, that murderer will continue to drive us to attack, wrack us with guilt, and perpetuate the darkness within and without.

But on the other hand, we must affirm the light. Ironically, in order to really face this darkness without shrinking in terror, we must do so from a perspective that recognizes one crucial and glorious thing: *It is not real*. In truth we are beings of light, peering into the darkness with “the lamp that will dispel it” (T-11.V.1:3). The Course constantly reminds us, hundreds of times in hundreds of ways, that while we think we are that poisonous snake in Lesson 93, who we really are is the Christ, God’s Son, whose “shimmering and perfect purity is far more brilliant than is any light that I have ever looked upon” (W-pII.252.1:2). The Course gives us countless affirmations it wants us to use to remind ourselves of our true Identity, such as this beautiful affirmation from the “What Am I” section of the Workbook:

*I am God’s Son, complete and healed and whole, shining in the reflection of His Love. In me is His creation sanctified and guaranteed eternal life. In me is love perfected, fear impossible, and joy established without opposite. I am the holy home of God Himself. I am the Heaven where His Love resides. I am His holy Sinlessness Itself, for in my purity abides His Own.* (W-pII.14.1:1-6)

We must, then, simultaneously look at our illusory darkness and affirm the reality of the light. To quote the entirety of a line I quoted earlier, “There is an advantage to bringing nightmares into awareness, but only to teach that they are not real, and that anything they contain is meaningless” (T-9.V.3:1). The Course’s dual uncovering/affirming approach is perfectly captured in an Urtext comment Jesus made about Freud’s dark view of the ego: “Freud was more clear-sighted about [the ego], because he knew a *bad* thing when he perceived it, but he failed to realize recognize that a bad thing cannot exist.” We must simultaneously be clear-sighted about how dark the darkness really is, and recognize that ultimately darkness cannot really exist—only light is real.

The line I used in the header for this section, a practice from Lesson 73 that I used during my own experience, perfectly captures this. The lesson acknowledges that the ego’s wishes can make a convincing darkness, “a world of illusions in which your belief can be very strong” (W-pI.73.1:5). But they are ultimately *idle* wishes, because the darkness they engender has no effect on the light of truth that is forever God’s Will and ours: “They make nothing that is real” (W-pI.73.1:7).

So, when you say, “I will there be light. Darkness is not my will,” you’re not trying to bludgeon your darkness into submission by pretending that you don’t believe in it, trying to paper over it with pretty words about the light. Instead, you’re saying something like: “I can see the darkness, and acknowledge that my belief in it has made it look awfully real to me. But now I choose to remember that it is not actually God’s Will or mine, so it can’t *really* exist. I choose instead to align my mind with my true will, which forever affirms the truth that there is nothing but light.” This, in the Course’s view, is the way to true healing of the mind.

## A few tips for moving from darkness to light

I’d like to conclude with a few tips I’ve gleaned from the experience described in this article. Now, I don’t want to give the impression that I’ve somehow mastered this. I’m still very much a work in progress. It could be that by the time you read this article, I’m right back in the darkness. (I know: “Cancel! Cancel!”) But since I did experience a real break-

through that is sticking so far, perhaps some of what I've learned from that may be helpful to you if you're facing some darkness in your life.

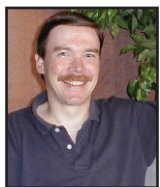
First, I want to encourage you to face what you're experiencing squarely, in a real no-nonsense manner. Acknowledge the feelings you're experiencing and be as honest as you can with yourself about the dark patterns in you that are contributing to those feelings and to the life situation you're facing. Though I haven't gone into detail about this in this article, part of my experience involved not only facing my sadness, but also confronting some aspects of my personality that I really don't like to admit to myself. I was nursing grievances, and engaging in some self-defeating thought patterns. Uncovering all this is a process I'm still going through, but I feel like I've made some good progress.

Second, look at that darkness with the light of the Course as your guide: both the light of the Course's teachings about the nature of the darkness, and the light of the Course's affirmations of who you really are. In other words, *study* and *practice* the Course—really do what it instructs us to do. Regarding practice, I think the key to it is repetition, repetition, repetition. As you can see from my description of my experience above, I spent a lot of time in that dark mood before the shift happened. I could have easily given up on my practice because it didn't seem to be working, but I kept at it and eventually I felt a real shift.

I often use the metaphor of chipping through a thick prison wall. You are enclosed in a dark cell, and you don't know how thick the wall is. You chip at it again and again; it takes a lot of effort and persistence. Because you haven't gotten through the wall yet, you're still in darkness, and you're tempted to give up in despair. That wall just seems infinitely thick! But in truth, you are making progress. If you keep at it, one of those strokes of your chipper will be the one that breaks through the wall completely and brings the light of freedom streaming in from the other side. Don't give up nine feet, eleven inches into a ten-foot wall. Don't give up right before the miracle.

Finally, if you do experience a breakthrough, reinforce it by continuing your study and practice, and also engaging in new behaviors (guided by the Holy Spirit) that reflect and reinforce your changed perspective. That's what I'm trying to do now. I'd really like to hold onto this shift; it feels like an important breakthrough with big ramifications for my life, and I don't want to let the inertia of my old patterns swallow it up again. So, I'm doing my best to hold onto that light with mental vigilance. And I've actually written down a list of new behaviors, behaviors which I hope will reinforce my new perspective. Time will tell how well I do that, but so far I'm very encouraged.

Of course, one powerful way to hold onto something you want to keep is to share it with someone else. That's what I've tried to do here. I hope the reflections I've shared here are helpful to you on your journey from darkness to light. May we all remember that darkness is not our will, that our uncovering of our illusory darkness will pave the way for us to wholeheartedly affirm the eternal will we share with God: "I will there be light."



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

**Greg Mackie.** *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 the "Course Meets World" feature on the Circle of Atonement's website. He sees his primary function as helping to develop a tradition of Course scholarship.*

## CIRCLE MAILBOX

*Here is some of the feedback we've received about Robert's article in A Better Way #93, "What Is the Meaning of Love?"*

Thank you for your wonderful treatise on love. I found it immensely stimulating.

For some years I worked with adults with "Learning Disabilities" and I absolutely accept and applaud your comments on this subject, particularly the question of "How could one such design his own curriculum?" I found great comfort in your words, too. It feels better to me to accept that I have a learning disability and allow it to be illumined by the Holy Spirit than to constantly feel I'm not "doing love right."

— Michael Gould

## CIRCLE NEWS

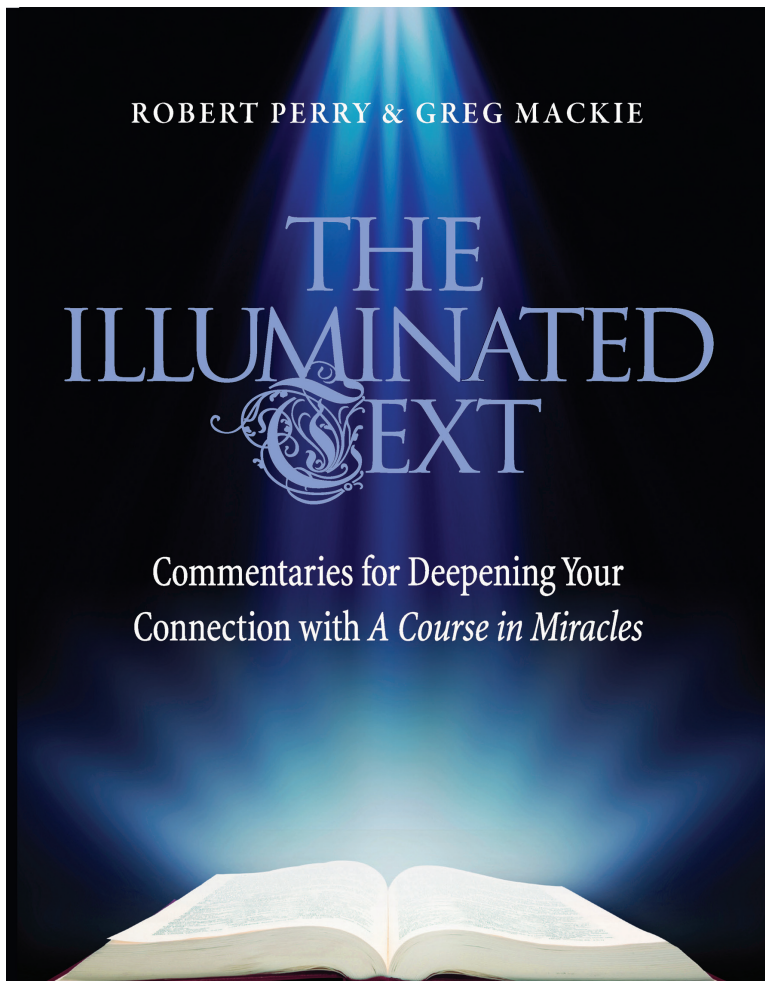
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—Amy Ellison

*I know of no better way to learn the message of the Text than this program.*

—Jan Worley

*Having studied the Course faithfully for 28 years, I never imagined the insights and miracles I would receive from these commentaries on the Text!*

—Mirkalice Gore

*There is nothing else in my years of studying the Course that has helped me so much!*

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—Jo Chandler

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—Don De Lene

*I would like to say that this year has been too amazing to actually put into words.*

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*Nothing less than totally inspiring.*

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