



CIRCLE OF ATONEMENT

Dedicated to *A Course in Miracles*

The Senselessness of War

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Exploring A Course in Miracles Podcast Episode #15 Discussion Guide

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What does *A Course in Miracles* have to say about war? Does it even address the subject? In fact, the Course contains over a hundred references to war and battle, along with many depictions of warfare and weaponry. In addition, there are hidden references to two wars in particular: World War II and the Vietnam War. Through it all, a consistent view of war emerges, which is radical and challenging, yet which should be no surprise if we believe that the Course really comes from Jesus, the one who told us “resist not evil” and who went willingly to his own death. This view includes war as we think of it—war between countries—yet its main focus is on the battleground that we call daily life. Join us for a discussion of one of the central issues in our lives and in this world: the issue of war.

1. We are used to war and war imagery in religion and spirituality being often positive

Religious texts and traditions have been heavily laced with war and war imagery. In the Old Testament, for instance, God commands the Israelites to sweep down on the cities of Canaan and “not leave alive anything that breathes” (Deuteronomy 20:17). In the Bhagavad-Gita, Arjuna is loath to enter into battle when it means killing his kinsmen, yet Krishna assures him that death doesn’t matter, since the inner Self is immortal, and killing is Arjuna’s duty.

2. There is a second stream, though, of pacifism and nonviolence

We see this second stream in the Indian principle of *ahimsa* (to do no harm), which is a key virtue in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. We also see it in the teachings of Jesus, particularly the Sermon on the Mount. Interest in nonviolence was revived in modern times by Leo Tolstoy (inspired by the Sermon on the Mount), and from there it flowed into Gandhi’s nonviolent resistance (Gandhi was also heavily influenced by the Sermon on the Mount), which in turned served as inspiration to Martin Luther King Jr. and many others in the civil rights movement.

3. The Course is of this second stream

There is no pro-war teaching in the Course and not even any pro-war imagery. This is perhaps to be expected, since the Course claims to come from Jesus, who not only taught nonviolence but demonstrated—when faced with death he did not defend himself and told his followers not to defend him with the sword (an event that is referenced in the Course—see T-6.I.14:3).

4. War is a major concern in the Course

There are 69 references to war, wars, warring, warlike, warriors, and 47 references to battle, battles, battleground, etc. There is a good deal of war imagery in the Course, including two extended discussions that feature the imagery

of an army or a battleground. There are numerous references to weapons, arms, swords, spears, shields, armor, guns, knives. And there are numerous cultural references: World War II, Vietnam War, along with movies and books about war. Through it all, an overall perspective on war emerges.

5. War in the Course is the single principle behind the separation, which takes many forms

It's the principle that began the separation. Its root is specialness, the desire to be above others:

Wars arise when some regard others as if they were on a different level. All interpersonal conflicts arise from this fallacy. (T-3.VI.2:3)

The principle of war takes many forms, the essence being the same in all of them:

- Not just war with other nations
- Also war against others—interpersonal conflict
- War within the psyche
- War with God

All choices are between war and peace:

What could you choose between but life or death, waking or sleeping, war or peace, your dream or your reality? (T-27.IX.3:5)

6. War is the normal state of the world

The Course says of the world, "it is a place of war" (M-14.5:3). We're on the battleground at work, with our friends, at home. The world is a battleground without boundary. Isn't that what we mean when we say "it's a jungle out there"? That saying means "The world is characterized by ruthless behavior and competition" (Free Dictionary). That was the original impetus for the Course—Helen and Bill were surrounded by concentric circles of conflict and wanted "a better way."

7. The Course's emphasis: not so much the evils of war, but the *senselessness* of war

- **It is senseless because there is no gain in it, only loss**

War is division, not increase. No one gains from strife. "What profiteth a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" (T-5.III.5:3-5)

- **It just brings fear; there is no safety on a battleground**

There *is* no place of safety in a battleground. You can look down on it in safety from above and not be touched, but from within it you can find no safety. Not one tree left standing still will shelter you. (T-23.IV.6:4-6)

- **Hope of peace cannot be found upon a battleground**

T-29.II.3 It has been hopeless to attempt to find the hope of peace upon a battleground.

- **It doesn't deliver the freedom it's supposed to**

You have probably heard many arguments on behalf of "the freedoms" [a reference to the famous "Four

Freedoms” of Franklin Roosevelt], which would indeed have been freedom if men had not chosen to fight for them [FDR used the Freedoms as a rationale for entering World War II]. That is why they perceive “the freedoms” as many instead of one. But the argument that underlies the defense of freedom is perfectly valid. Because it is true, it should not be fought for, but it *should* be sided with. Those who are against freedom believe that its outcome will hurt them, which cannot be true. But those who are for freedom, even if they are misguided in how they defend it, are siding with the one thing in this world which is true. Whenever anyone can listen fairly to both sides of any issue, he will make the right decision. This is because he *has* the answer. Conflict can indeed be projected, but it must be intrapersonal first. (T-7.I.5:1-9)

- **It is an attack on ourselves**

How strange indeed becomes this war against yourself! (T-23.I.2:1)

- **We do not really want it.**

This is your part: to realize that murder in *any* form is not your will. (T-23.IV.11:1)

- **It is senseless because there is no opponent**

Every response to the ego is a call to war, and war does deprive you of peace. ²Yet in this war *there is no opponent*. ³This is the reinterpretation of reality which you must make to secure peace, and the *only* one you need ever make. ⁴Those whom you perceive as opponents are *part* of your peace, which you are giving up by attacking them. (T-8.I.4:1-4)

- **The Course’s war imagery reinforces this theme of senselessness**

- “Above the Battleground” (T-23.IV). This section makes the point that there is no safety and nothing to gain on a battleground. This section in turn was inspired by Helen’s blue-gray bird dream (see Cameo 28) in which she is a highly irrational bird who refuses to do the natural thing and fly away from the battleground.

- “The army of the powerless” (T-21.VII.2-5). This is an image of an irrational, chaotic army that runs after one enemy after another. Its soldiers forget they have a common cause and turn on each other and themselves.

- Weapons in the Course (swords, spears, shields, guns, knives, arms, armor). They are characterized as tiny, ineffectual “toys” that we use against an enemy that isn’t there and also use against ourselves.

And those who serve the lord of death have come to worship in a separated world, each with his tiny spear and rusted sword, to keep his ancient promises to die. (T-29.VI.6:6)

Take time today to lay aside your shield which profits nothing, and lay down the spear and sword you raise against an enemy without existence. (W-182.11:1)

Lay down the cruel sword of judgment that you hold against your throat. (W-190.9:4)

- **The Course’s cultural references reinforce this same theme**

- “The freedoms” passage about the Four Freedoms.

- *Grand Illusion* (two references). *Grand Illusion* (French: *La Grande Illusion*) is a 1937 French prisoner-of-war film, widely regarded as one of the greatest films ever made. It celebrates the ability of human warmth and respect to rise above the national boundaries and political divisions that lead to the grand illusion: the usefulness of war.
- *The Great Dictator* (one reference, right next to one of the “grand illusion” references). *The Great Dictator* is a 1940 film by Charlie Chaplin which is a satirical condemnation of Adolf Hitler. It ends with a stirring speech against war and for universal brotherhood.
- *The Mouse That Roared* (one reference, during the discussion of “the army of the powerless”). *The Mouse That Roared* was a 1955 satirical book that was made into a 1959 movie. In it, the tiny country of the Duchy of Grand Fenwick decides to declare war on the United States with the intention of losing. Its “army,” equipped with bows and arrows, arrives in New York, where the streets have been emptied by a nuclear drill, and wanders about trying to find someone to surrender to. The similarity to “the army of the powerless” is unmistakable.
- Don Quixote (two references, both negative). Don Quixote is not a soldier, but he is a knight. In the Course, he is portrayed not as a romantic figure, but as a “lean and foolish” man who insanely battles against imaginary giants in order to puff up his weak ego. He pursues a truly impossible dream.

In both the cultural allusions and the references to war and weapon imagery, there is a distinct comical note. It’s not that war itself is comical—the Course contains a powerful image of the effects of war (“the broken bodies and the shattered limbs, the screaming dying and the silent dead”—T-27.VI.3:4)—rather, it’s the *behavior* of those engaged in war that is lampooned.

Overall picture

War is not good, but neither is it evil.

It is senseless.

It doesn’t bring gain. There are no spoils. It doesn’t buy us peace or freedom.

It just brings loss.

It is ultimately a war against ourselves. It is suicidal.

There is no opponent. Our supposed opponents are part of our peace.

War is not strength. It is weakness.

The weapons are not to be valued and respected. They are pathetic toys that we use against ourselves.

We are not being strong and heroic. We are being foolish, irrational, even comical.

We do not really want it. “Murder in *any* form is not your will.”