

# The Circle's Approach to *A Course in Miracles*

by Robert Perry

The foundation for everything we do at the Circle is a particular approach to *A Course in Miracles*, one that has developed over time and is indeed still developing.

There is no question that the Course is difficult for our minds to grasp. Trying to comprehend it can feel like being lost in a giant maze. A single sentence often contains multiple terms used in non-standard ways, expressing multiple unfamiliar ideas. And there are over a thousand pages of such sentences. What do we do?

## The conventional approach

Having been active in the Course community for nearly forty years, the main thing I feel we have done so far is a perfectly natural human response. I just don't think it's the right response. We can see it as consisting of two closely related parts.

### 1. Seeing the Course in light of our expectations

One part of this response is to project onto the Course our expectations and preconceptions. When we open the Course, we are faced with a mountain of difficult verbiage. Sentences seem impenetrable. We finish a section and have no idea what we have read. We desperately need a key to unlock these words. And so we naturally turn to what we have picked up out there, what we have heard from Course teachers and students and from spiritual teachings in general.

Then we take this body of ideas and attitudes and pour it into the sentences and paragraphs we read. We have heard, for instance, that it's only about changing our own mind, and so when we read "*The sole responsibility of the miracle worker is to accept the Atonement for himself*," we naturally think, "Ah, here is the Course saying it's only about my mind" (while conveniently ignoring the term "miracle worker," which refers to someone who works miracles for *others*).

The problem with this approach is that to interpret something in light of our preconceptions is what the Course means by "Projection makes perception" (T-1.21.I.1:1). It amounts to seeing something as we expect it to be and want it to be, rather than how it *is*.

Not surprisingly, the author of the Course, who I believe is Jesus, displays concern that we will do this very thing with it. He encourages us not to interpret the Course based on our familiarity with the New Testament (see T-6.I.23:2-3), the teachings of Edgar Cayce (see Cameo 15), or our own ego (W-196.2:2-4). Because we can be so "inventive when it comes to twisting symbols around" (T-3.III.6:3), Jesus encourages us to "read these teachings carefully" (T-4.I.8:8) and to "not read this hastily or wrongly. (M-29.7:3). In a personal aside to Helen and Bill after one of the miracle principles, he said, "*Be very careful* in interpreting this."

You can understand why we would need such cautions about misinterpretation. Given human nature, we could easily end up pasting over the Course with our own ideas and with what we

have picked up from various teachers, books, and traditions, to the point where the Course itself is barely visible under all the layers. After all, isn't that what we did with Jesus himself?

## **2. Boiling the Course down to a simple formula**

The other part of our attempt to get a handle on the Course is trying to boil it down to a simple formula. Every Course student is in search of that formula and every Course teacher is supposed to supply it. There are many different formulas, of course, but the basic template is roughly the same. The formula must contain a few ideas that can ideally be compressed into a sentence or two.

This desire to simplify is an inherent tendency of the human mind, one that Jesus talked about. In guidance that led up to the *Song of Prayer* supplement (which can be found in *Absence from Felicity*, by Ken Wapnick, pp. 445-446), he spoke of the process of formulating prayers, in which we condense a more general sense of need into the specific words of a prayer request. This, Jesus said, is an attempt “to limit, and by limiting, to make a vast area of experience more manageable.” Isn't this what is driving our search for a simple formula for the Course—the need to “make a vast area of experience more manageable”?

Jesus then goes on to criticize this need in relation to prayer: “But that means manageable by *you*. For many aspects of living in this world that is necessary. But not for asking.” Could we perhaps add to this, “But not for *A Course in Miracles*”?

After all, while we are condensing the Course into “manageable” form, we are making an enormous number of subjective decisions about what to include and what to leave out. These in turn will inevitably be guided and influenced by the very unconscious biases the Course is trying to free us from. What are the odds that the formula thus produced will accurately reflect the Course?

As a result, boiling the Course down to a simple formula is not so different from seeing it in light of our preconceptions. The result of both is the same: We end up seeing in the Course what our own biases and expectations have projected onto it. We see more the contents of our own minds than the Course itself.

## **The Circle's approach**

Our approach at the Circle is to do more or less the opposite of what I describe above. Rather than seeing in the Course what we have unconsciously projected onto it, we try to draw out and discern what the Course itself is really saying. With any book, you want to try to figure out what the author is trying to say. But how much more is this the case if you believe that the author is Jesus, if you accept the claim that “This course has come from him” (M-23.7:1)? At that point, wouldn't you hang on his every word? Wouldn't you want to set aside your old worldview and open your ears to his new message?

Our approach of drawing out its intended meaning can be captured in two points that are the counterparts to the ones I described above.

## **1. Setting aside our preconceptions and trying to carefully discern what he really means**

When we talk to others, we are, of course, trying to get across a particular meaning, a meaning that we want the listener to understand. The same is true when Jesus speaks in the Course. He is trying to convey a specific meaning, which he wants us to understand.

I think there is a degree of collective denial around this. We often tell ourselves that the Course is meant to be open to each person's interpretation, that it means whatever feels right to each of us. But that's not how communication works and that's not how the Course talks about itself.

One of the sections in Chapter 3 describes itself as being "not open to more than one interpretation" (T-3.IV.7:2), and this attitude is reflected throughout the Course. Further, as we saw earlier, the Course is definitely concerned about us misinterpreting its words. Which brings us back to where we started: Jesus is conveying a specific meaning that he wants us to understand.

Our aim at the Circle, then, is to approach the interpretation of these words with the utmost care and respect, as if we are entering a holy temple. There is a particular meaning there and our goal is to uncover it, as fully and accurately as possible. This involves an abundance of detailed work and methodology, but it is fundamentally no different than carefully listening to what the person in front of you is saying.

Yet if we are going to uncover Jesus' intended meaning, there is one more thing we need to do. We need to set to one side our expectations—what we believe the Course *should* say and what we *want* it to say. We have to entertain the possibility that our preconceptions could be wrong and that our desires could lead us astray. How else can we be truly open to what Jesus is trying to say?

Speaking for myself, I try to take this openness into every sentence and paragraph and section I study. I must be open to the idea that what I saw before was *incorrect*, and I must be certain that what I saw before was *incomplete*. Without those assumptions, how could my understanding ever grow? Yet with those assumptions, my understanding of the Course undergoes constant growth and revision. The growth comes from investigating new themes and from better understanding familiar themes and sections. The revision is mostly in the small things but sometimes in the big things. In the last few years, for instance, I've gone through a major revision in my understanding of time.

If we are going to contact Jesus' intended meanings, this is the way we have to do it. We have to work hard at accurate interpretation and we have to actively consider that what we have could be wrong.

## **2. Focusing on specific passages, not on sweeping generalities**

The formula-based approach that I described earlier is all about generalities. In my experience, Course students and teachers talk mostly in generalities, and everyone has their favorite few. And then when questions arise, those same generalities are consulted to answer the questions. For instance, I've been told by a number of teachers over the years that a holy relationship can't take two because that would go against some general principle in the Course. But there are *six*

*chapters* on holy relationships in the Text. Shouldn't we just open the book and see what they say?

Our approach at the Circle is to focus first and foremost on the small scale. What does Jesus say in this key passage, in this seminal discussion, or in this relevant section? And then only as we excavate those specific sites do we carefully extrapolate more general principles from there. The problem with jumping immediately to general principles is that the more general we get, the more subjective we're getting. With each level we go up from the words on the page, the more risk there is of our own distortions sneaking in. We do need to arrive at generalities—they're crucial—but we need to do so very carefully, making sure that they accurately reflect the evidence on the ground.

So often I feel like Course students and teachers are gliding above the Course, talking in vague generalities, rarely touching down on the page. Our approach at the Circle is less like a flyover and more like a mining expedition. There is treasure in the Course, treasure like the world has never seen, but this treasure cannot be obtained by flying over the Course. You have to mine it; you have to dig into the words.

### **What is the resulting picture of the Course?**

The approach I have just outlined results in a dramatically different picture of *A Course in Miracles*. I cannot stress this enough. It produces not only different views on a long list of important teachings, it yields a different understanding of the basic nature and character of the Course itself. I'll attempt to outline that different picture in the form of six points.

#### **1. Rather than being about a few simple themes, the Course is an ocean of wisdom. It is incredibly rich and varied.**

Though we typically talk about the Course in terms of a handful of simple themes, the Course itself is the opposite of that. There is an unseen wealth of meaning in each sentence. I've often said that I couldn't adequately draw out the meaning of a particular section without writing a small book. One reason for this is that there are so many themes interweaving with each other in every section. If, for instance, you track how many themes are in a given Text section (defined as key terms that repeat in that section), you will find that there are around fifty—just in that one section! They're there; we're just not seeing them. If there are fifty themes in one section, imagine how many there are in the entire Course. Thousands, and all of them interacting with each other. The Course is truly oceanic. It's beyond the ability of the human mind to either devise or encompass. It's the opposite of our simple formulas.

#### **2. The Course is constantly saying things that cut against the grain of both conventional Course wisdom and contemporary spiritual thought.**

It is hard to overstate just how different the Course's teachings are from what we usually think. We tend to assume that it teaches exactly what Course teachers and students say it does. But it doesn't. A few years ago I wrote an article on what I call "Course lore," ideas that Course students repeat so often that we all assume they are found in the Course itself, when in fact they are not. My list consisted of fifty items, including such familiar ideas as "The Course is a self-study course," "God is impersonal," "The Course is not about behavior," and "The miracle is just

a shift in perception.” If you can find support for these ideas in the Course, you win the prize; I’ve never been able to find it.

We also tend to assume that the Course is teaching the same things as we read in contemporary spiritual teachings, such as those of Eckhart Tolle or Adyashanti. But again, it’s not. Despite having many important points of agreement with contemporary spiritual teachings, on many fundamental issues the Course goes its own way.

### **3. The Course is already practical. We don’t need to make it practical.**

We all know the Course is full of amazing ideas, but then we wonder how to apply them. In search of how to make the Course practical, we turn to any number of outside teachings and methods, or we devise our own ways of application. Yet all of this represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the Course, which says “it is the practical with which this course is most concerned” (M-29.5:7). The Course provides extensive, explicit instruction in how to practice its ideas. Indeed, it has an entire volume devoted to this: the Workbook. And there are frequent practical instructions in the Text as well. The Course is quite aware that we don’t think it’s practical, but it claims—perhaps with some reason—that this is only because we don’t *do* the practical things it tells us to do:

You may complain that this course is not sufficiently specific for you to understand it and *use it*. Yet it has been very specific, and you have not done what it specifically advocates. This is not a course in the play of ideas, but in their *practical application*. (T-11.IX.4:1-3)

### **4. It is a genuine course.**

The Course is not just the same simple message endlessly repeated. It really is a *course* that seeks to guide us through an educational process. The Text is like a series of lectures in a college course, with each “lecture” (section) presenting new ideas that build on what has gone before. The Workbook, in spite of how it’s often treated, is not a shorter Text. Its main purpose is not teaching but *practice*. It slowly guides us into a sophisticated structure of spiritual practice that we are meant to live within for the rest of our days. The Manual for Teachers is not just an FAQ; it is an actual teacher’s manual, meant to guide teachers of *A Course in Miracles* as they proceed on their journey and teach new students of the Course. We haven’t truly understood the nature of any of the volumes of the Course, which is why we haven’t understood that it really *is* a course.

### **5. It is a spiritual path, not just a teaching.**

We typically think of the Course as a teaching, a thought system. But it always refers to itself as a *course*; not a spiritual teaching, but a spiritual *path*. As such, for those whose path this is, it is meant to be both *long-term* and *exclusive*. Long-term, because a path doesn’t get you to its lofty goal overnight. Exclusive, because a path is a *particular* route to a destination. Even if other paths arrive at the same destination, they are different ways to get there. You can’t walk two roads at once. That is why the Course says, “You are not making use of the course if you insist on using means that have served others well, neglecting what was made for *you*” (T-22.VII.8:1).

In order to make actual progress on this road, to put one foot in front of the other, we have to undergo training. As Jesus says early on, “This course is a *mind-training* course” (T-3.I.1:2).

Hence, we must do more than learn and discuss the ideas (however crucial that is); we must also submit ourselves to the training. *A Course in Miracles* is more than a book to read; it is a path to walk.

### **6. It is a way of life.**

It is only recently that I have begun to call the Course a way of life, yet when you think about the extent to which the Course wants to govern our lives, I think the term is perfectly appropriate. Once we enter fully into its way, we get up in the morning, read our scripture (*A Course in Miracles*), and use meditation to establish our day in a state of peace. We then pause for a few moments every hour to renew our peace. We reinforce it still further by repeating a spiritual thought several times during the hour. We repeat that same thought to restore our peace whenever we notice it has been disturbed. And we end our day of peace with a final quiet time spent with God.

This different way of conducting our inner life spills over into a different way of conducting our outer lives. We constantly turn to the Holy Spirit for guidance for even small, seemingly mundane decisions. That guidance tells us to devote our behavior not to getting for ourselves, but to giving miracles (expressions of love) to others in an attempt to heal them and thus heal ourselves. As we grow in this way of life, our days are filled with holy encounters. We slowly join with others in holy relationships, in which both individuals are united in a common purpose. Through all this, we gradually discover our special function—our life purpose—in which we devote our particular strengths to making our unique contribution to the salvation of the world.

True, this way of life has few outer trappings. Yet a “way of life” is simply “the manner in which a person lives” (Cambridge Dictionary). If there is a way that, through various practices and habits, governs your mental life, your behavior, your decisions, your relationships, and your purpose, what else could you call it but a way of life? *A Course in Miracles*, then, is indeed a way of life.

## **This is the Course the world needs**

I realize this sounds daunting. An ocean of wisdom? A way of life? This is more than we bargained for. In a quick-fix culture in which everyone is selling us total transformation in five minutes, that’s what we wanted. Yet that is not what we *needed*. The real job of transformation is a multifaceted, lifelong affair. For this job we don’t need a little bathtub whose water is never changed. We need an inexhaustible ocean of great depth, power, and majesty, whose waters we can endlessly swim in and explore, and whose bounty can forever sustain us.

If this is the *Course in Miracles* we need, it is also the one the world needs. Surely that is where the Course is headed—to the world. Do we really think Jesus would dictate over a thousand pages of groundbreaking wisdom for just a few? How can the man who transformed Western civilization not have his eye on the whole world?

Jesus addressed this question in guidance that Helen Schucman received on December 31, 1975. Referring to the Course, he said, “It will grow from infancy into a helper of the world.” This will happen, he said, under his guidance: “I will direct its growth.” But the key to this growth, he

said, is for the Course's life to develop purely, with "no misunderstanding and misinterpretation." It is destined for the world, but it must reach the world in its true form. To wash up on every shore, it must do so as the ocean it really is.

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