

What Is *A Course in Miracles*?

A *Course in Miracles* is a path of spiritual development that takes the form of an educational course consisting of a Text, a Workbook for Students, and a Manual for Teachers. Its aim is to reeducate our basic perception of reality and teach us to extend this new perception to others, so that we can both give happiness and find happiness.

The Course has no human author in the conventional sense, but was authored through a process of inner dictation. Helen Schucman (1909-1981) and William Thetford (1923-1988) were respected psychologists at the top of their field working at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York City. In the summer of 1965, after years of conflict with each other and within their department, Bill made an impassioned speech to Helen in which he said, "There must be another way"—a way in which people could cooperate rather than compete. Helen surprised him by saying she would join him in this new approach. It was a rare moment of joining for them, which they knew was significant at the time, but which had repercussions far beyond what they could have imagined.

Helen, a self-professed "militant atheist," soon began having a series of inner visions, heightened dreams, and psychic experiences. These culminated in the fall of 1965, when she heard an inner voice say to her "This is a course in miracles, please take notes." This same voice told her that she had agreed to take down *A Course in Miracles* as her contribution to a larger plan to restore humanity's forward spiritual progress.

Thus began seven years of "scribing" *A Course in Miracles*. Helen would write down the words of the inner voice in shorthand notebooks and would later dictate what she had written to Bill, who would type it up. She sometimes resisted taking dictation and often argued with the Course's teaching,

yet she did her utmost to faithfully record what she was hearing. Despite her skepticism, the Course clearly commanded great respect from her. In her autobiography she wrote of “the particular combination of certainty, wisdom, gentleness, clarity and patience that characterized the Voice.”¹ She and Bill considered the Course a sacred trust that they had been charged with, and Helen ultimately came to refer to it as her life’s work.

Once *A Course in Miracles* was published in 1976, it had a similar effect on readers. They, like Helen, often argued with it, yet at the same time granted it tremendous authority, and many devoted their lives to it. In the time since it was published, the Course has sold nearly three million copies. It has become a modern spiritual classic, acquiring a scriptural status in the eyes of readers around the world.

A course

First and foremost, *A Course in Miracles* is a course, an educational program. It is designed to take its students through a process of internalizing its thought system. In this process, we learn to accept into our minds and extend to others what the Course calls *miracles*, which heal the perception of the one receiving them. Each of the Course’s three volumes signifies a different phase in this overall process. (The volumes need not be done in order, but they are arranged in a logical sequence that reflects the overall progression the Course seems to expect students to pass through.)

The Text is the first, longest, and most important volume. It provides the “theoretical foundation”² of the Course. The Text is a masterpiece of spiritual thought. As it guides us through hundreds of topics, the meanings we have assigned the world begin to fall away, revealing a new meaning in everything. This happens even on the level of language. The Course uses familiar terms, but fills them with new meaning, making each term a microcosm of its thought system. As a result, the Text is not an easy read. To reap its rewards, we have to truly engage with it. The Course asks us to read its words slowly and carefully, thinking about what they mean. It

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1. Helen Cohn Schucman, Ph.D., *Autobiography* (Temecula, CA: Foundation for *A Course in Miracles*, 1990, 2009), p. 44.
 2. W-In.1:1.

asks us to take them personally and treat them as practical, as more than an intellectual game. If we will do this with the Text, we will experience our old worldview being slowly dismantled and a new worldview arising in its place.

Study of the Text is the first phase of the Course's program. It is here that the Course's thought system initially enters our minds. This is only the beginning of the process, yet it is the foundation for all that follows.

The second volume, the Workbook, contains 365 lessons, one for each day of the year. In each lesson (with the exception of review lessons), we take a single Course idea and practice it in specified ways throughout the day. As we apply it to ourselves, to others, and to our daily situations and events, our perception shifts and we see with new eyes. We feel peace where before we felt anxiety and agitation. We ultimately learn to enfold each day in peace, so that we begin the day in a state of peace, renew that peace throughout the day, recover it when it is shaken, and end the day resting in that same peace. In service of this goal, the Workbook teaches us a variety of different practices, including its own methods of meditation and prayer. The Workbook, then, is really a training program in the Course's system of spiritual practice. Even though it is designed as a one-year program, it is meant to ground in us a lifelong habit of spiritual practice, to usher us into a new internal way of life.

Practice of the Workbook is the second phase in the Course's curriculum. Through practice, the same ideas that we learned in the Text become more deeply internalized. They increasingly become the lens through which we see and the source of what we feel.

The Manual for Teachers, while it can be read by any student, is written to those who have completed the Text and Workbook and will now extend the Course's thought system to others. The Manual focuses on two forms of this extension. The first form is that of the teacher of pupils, in which a more experienced student of the Course plays the role of mentor, skillfully guiding a pupil along the path of the Course. This is apparently the Course's preferred method for teaching and learning its curriculum. The other form is that of a healer who goes to those with health issues and shines the healing power of forgiveness into their minds. Extending to oth-

ers can take many forms in addition to these, but its essence is simply the giving of love, usually in very ordinary ways.

Extension is the third and final phase in the Course's program. Here, we take the same thought system we studied in the Text and practiced in the Workbook and extend it to others in the form of expressions of love. This benefits us as well as them, for when we give away an idea (like love), we strengthen its presence in our own minds. As the Course says, "Everything you teach you are learning. Teach only love, and learn that love is yours and *you* are love."³ Through our extension, the Course's thought system receives its final reinforcement in us, so that it at last commands our total belief. The new world of meaning that we first encountered in the Text has now become the *only* meaning that we see in ourselves and in all things.

The teaching

A Course in Miracles offers a unique perspective on reality, the human condition, and the path to happiness. What follows is an attempt to condense its grand symphony of ideas into a brief summary.

The foundation for everything in the Course is its concept of an unconditionally loving God. Though God is genderless, the Course describes God as being like the perfect father—purely loving, without the slightest trace of anger—only expanded to infinity. Before time began, this loving Father created us as His beloved Sons. He poured all of His attributes, all of His being, into us, so that we were exactly like Him—egoless, limitless, and filled with an impartial, all-encompassing love. He created us without bodies, without any boundaries to wall us off from Him. We thus existed in boundless oneness with God and with each other, basking in a love from Him that exceeds our current comprehension. As the Course says about this love, "There is nothing on earth with which it can be compared, and nothing you have ever felt apart from Him that resembles it ever so faintly."⁴ We lived in a timeless Heaven in a state of happiness so expansive that taking our greatest moment of earthly happiness and multiplying it ten thousand times only begins to hint at it.⁵ Such a Heaven may

3. T-6.IV.7:7-8.

4. T-14.VI.2:4.

5. W-107.2:1-6.

sound alien to us now, yet this, says the Course, is our natural environment. This is home.

What, then, happened? “Into eternity, where all is one, there crept a tiny, mad idea at which the Son of God remembered not [i.e., forgot] to laugh.”⁶ We had a thought that we could go our own way, that we could be above the other Sons and even above God. This was impossible, for all of reality is changelessly held within the power of God’s authorship. And so we withdrew into a *dream* of separation. We collectively dreamt an entire universe in which everyone was separate, selfishly contending with each other and locked inside vulnerable bodies that aged and died. The Course teaches that the world of time and space was not created by God: “He is not mad. Yet only madness makes a world like this.”⁷ It also teaches that however solid this world may seem to be, it is not truly real.

This might initially sound disheartening, yet it is actually wonderful news, for it means that Heaven remains the only reality and that this world of pain never really happened. From an ultimate standpoint, it is laughable to think that we could truly leave God and make a world apart from Him. We therefore have a rational basis for feeling free from all that we have done and all that has been done to us, for we *are* free of it.

We, however, believe this world is real, and so all of our efforts go towards rearranging its circumstances. We chase after possessions and money and power. We search for that special person who will make us happy. We lavish attention on our body—its appearance, its pleasure, its comfort, and its safety. Yet none of it really works. It all just perpetuates the real problem, which remains unaddressed.

The real problem is not in the world; it is in our mind. The problem is what the Course calls the *ego*. The ego is nothing more than a false belief about our identity. It is the belief that we are separate, alone, and on our own. The ego is *egocentric*. Its basic mode is attack, both in the form of attack thoughts (e.g., judgment and condemnation) and attacking behavior. We try to cover up our attacks with smiles, but their basic intent is still to take from others—their self-respect, their possessions, their status, their innocence—for the sake of our own gain. All we really receive, however,

6. T-27.X.6:1.

7. W-152.6:6-7.

is a crushing burden of guilt. Over time our “sins” accumulate, so that we end up dragging our past misdeeds behind us like heavy chains. Deep in our unconscious, we believe that we have hopelessly defiled our original innocence, that we “have made a devil of God’s Son.”⁸ This belief is the hidden cause of all our suffering, for it is a constant affirmation that we *deserve* to suffer, as punishment for what we’ve done. The Course puts it bluntly: “Guilt is...the sole cause of pain in any form.”⁹

In a desperate attempt to get rid of this guilt, we project it outward. Now the guilt that we see inside appears to be outside of us, lurking in everyone we meet. And now the pain that is actually caused from within (by guilt) seems to come at us from without, from a series of callous people and calamitous events. Through projection, we see ourselves as a good person surrounded by a cruel world, a world bristling with potential threats. We therefore live in a state of fear, wondering where the next attack will come from. What we don’t realize is that the real source of our fear is our own guilt. We are afraid that our sins will eventually catch up with us.

As hopeless as this scenario sounds, the Course teaches that there is a way out of the ego and all the suffering it brings. This way involves a transformation of our thinking, a transformation that mainly takes the form of a sea change in our perception of others. We begin by realizing that our current view of others, far from being objective truth, is the product of hidden dynamics in our own minds. Other people are radically different from the beings we perceive them to be. We see them as sinners who have stolen our happiness, but that is only because we have projected onto them the sense of sinfulness within us that has *really* robbed us of happiness. We see them as tiny bodies containing petty personalities, but in truth they are something infinitely greater. They are the limitless Sons of God, who are still as pure and holy as they were in the instant God created them. If we can just withdraw our projections and see past outer appearances, we will see in others, as the Course puts it, a “beauty that will enchant you, and will never cease to cause you wonderment at its perfection.”¹⁰ And the beauty we see in them we will then recognize in ourselves.

8. W-101.5:3.

9. T-30.VI.2:1.

10. T-17.II.2:6.

This shift in perception is called *forgiveness*, but it is a very different kind of forgiveness than what we are used to. In the Course, we do not first assume that another person really deserves our anger but then go ahead and “forgive” her anyway. Rather, we realize that our anger is based on a mistaken perception of her, and so we let that perception go. We forgive, in other words, by realizing “that there is nothing to forgive.”¹¹ This kind of forgiveness is so egoless that, in our ego-bound state, we need the help of the Holy Spirit, God’s Voice in the dream, to complete it. It is He Who, in a holy instant, accomplishes the miracle of forgiveness within us. Yet because this forgiveness is egoless, choosing it teaches us that *we* are egoless. If to err is human and to forgive divine, then our forgiveness shows us that we are divine.

Through forgiveness we begin to relate to others in a new way. Rather than taking from them to meet our needs, we extend help and healing to them for the sake of *their* needs. We take the love that arises in us through forgiveness and express it in a helpful way. This, in fact, is the main meaning of the word “miracle” in the Course: an expression of love that heals the perception of another—which is what love always does. As our love deepens, giving miracles becomes our whole function, our life purpose. “I am the light of the world,” the Workbook has us say. “That is my only function. That is why I am here.”¹² In this function we rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, trusting Him to tell us who needs our help and how they can best receive it. Rather than this being a noble sacrifice, it fills us with joy, for the more we give the more we ourselves receive. As the Course assures us many times, “giving and receiving are the same.”¹³

Our practice of forgiveness and our extension to others eventually allow the eyes of Christ to open within us. These are spiritual eyes in us that see with true vision. Seeing past bodies, they look upon the holiness in others just as plainly as our body’s eyes look on physical forms. Through the eyes of Christ we will at last see the real world, a world of light composed of the radiant holiness in everyone and everything. The body of another will now seem increasingly irrelevant “and will at length be seen as little more than

11. T-15.VIII.5:7.

12. W-61.5:3-5.

13. T-25.X.9:6; T-26.I.3:4, W-108.6:1; W-121.9:1; W-225.1:1; M-2.5:5.

just a shadow circling round the good.”¹⁴ No longer will we see a world of enemies poised to attack. Although the forms of the world will still behave much as before, we will see beneath the surface to a world that could not be more opposite: “Everyone and everything I see will lean toward me to bless me. I will recognize in everyone my dearest friend.”¹⁵ And we in turn will love everyone, with a divine love that completely ignores all differences between people, including differences in how they treat us.

The real world is ultimately an illusion, yet it is a pristine *reflection* of reality. And so when we have fully entered the real world, we are just a step away from Heaven. Our love and forgiveness have taught us that we are not the guilty ego we had believed ourselves to be. Did we really think we had the power to change the purity God gave us? “We lay aside the arrogance which says that we are sinners, guilty and afraid, ashamed of what we are, and lift our hearts in true humility instead to Him Who has created us immaculate, like to Himself in power and in love.”¹⁶ Our own efforts are now done. All barriers to the awareness of our true identity are past. We are finally ready to be in our Father’s love again. Now God Himself leans down to us “and takes us in His arms and sweeps away the cobwebs of our sleep.”¹⁷ Now He lifts us back into our waking state of oneness with Him. Now at last we can say to Him, in the words of the closing line of the Text, “And we are home, where You would have us be.”¹⁸

14. T-31.VII.3:6.

15. W-60.3:4-5.

16. W-152.10:1.

17. W-168.3:4.

18. T-31.IX.12:7.