

INTRODUCTION

No one would deny humankind's great need for healing. All around us in this war-torn world the evidence is clear for anyone willing to see it. On a grand scale one sees wars, famine, disaster, and disease; on a small scale the countless little hurts, psychological and physical, spiritual and emotional, that we know so well. Sickness and death, pain and sorrow, separation and loss are clearly part of our human condition. Of course, there are also periods of great love, joy, and peace, and some of us are fortunate enough to experience many of these. But even into the most fortunate lives pain intrudes at times.

Dissatisfaction with our lives, the limits of the body, and the inescapability of death have been central themes of the great religions. In the immensity of the universe we seem "as dust," say the ancient biblical psalms. Our lives are "but toil and trouble; they are soon gone. . . . they come to an end like a sigh" (Psalm 90). "What man can live and not see death?" (Psalm 89). In the Bhagavad Gita (the "Hindu Bible"), the wise are said to be those capable of "seeing the defects in birth, death, old age, sickness, and suffering." "Unenlightened existence is inherently unsatisfactory," states the Buddha's First Noble Truth. Recently, this sentiment has been echoed by contemporary existentialists who see anxiety, angst, and despair as inescapable elements of human life.

But the great religions do not stop with merely recognizing the pain of our usual existence. They go further, to declare that we can escape the pain, and they offer

us means for this escape. In fact, every great religion claims that our suffering is the product of ignorance and illusion. Suffering, they say, results when we forget who we really are—Children of God, Atman, Buddha Nature or one with the Tao—and mistake ourselves for limited beings, skin-encapsulated egos trapped inside fragile, transitory bodies. We suffer ultimately, say the great religions, from a case of mistaken identity, a false self-concept, an erroneous image that is but a pale shadow of our true limitless being. We live not in reality, but in illusion—maya or samsara. We have forgotten who we really are and misperceive our nightmares of sickness and suffering for reality, while our true nature abides unchanged and unchangeable as pure radiant sat-chit-ananda: limitless consciousness, being, and bliss.

From this viewpoint, the sickness and suffering that seem inescapable from our egocentric perspective are recognized as illusions, incapable of harming our true Self in any way. All suffering is seen as but a dream. It follows that the healing of sickness and pain involves awakening from our collective dream and remembering who we really are. This awakening is known in various traditions as salvation, satori, liberation, or enlightenment. It need not involve changes in our physical circumstances because our pain and sickness, and even the bodies in which they occur, are parts of a dream. We need not seek to change our true nature, which is actually unchangeable. Rather we need only recognize, remember, and awaken to it, and the nightmare of suffering ceases to exert its apparent effects on us. As *A Course in Miracles* says: "Those who seek the light are merely covering their eyes. The light is in them now. Enlightenment is but a recognition, not a change at all." This recognition has been the goal of spiritual teachers and traditions across countless cultures and centuries, and each has offered a path and practice by which it can occur.

A Course in Miracles represents one form of this timeless wisdom, a path to enlightenment, a guide to awak-

ening, a gift of healing. As such it can be seen as a contemporary version of the "perennial wisdom," that common core of wisdom at the heart of the great religions.

Like other forms of the perennial wisdom, the *Course* recognizes the universality of pain in human existence and the universal need for healing. It therefore offers us a path of healing and awakening by which our dreams of suffering can be recognized for what they are, and our true nature can be remembered.

In offering this path, the *Course* makes a diagnosis of our condition, identifies its causes, and presents a treatment plan. It emphasizes that our dreams are perpetuated by unhealthy habits, desires, and states of mind such as fear, anger, and attack. When we let these go, says the *Course*, we awaken from the dream and recognize ourselves as we have always been: children of God, limitless, blissful, loving, and free from suffering of any kind.

The means for this healing involves a systematic practice of mental habits that reduce and ultimately eliminate painful mind states. The *Course* encourages us to exchange anger for forgiveness, fear for love, and curse for blessing. In short, it advises us to substitute peaceful, loving states for angry, painful ones. This is no small task; countless people have devoted their lives to this aim and have found it to be a forbidding challenge. But *A Course in Miracles* claims to offer a gentle path in which this task of healing and awakening is made as easy as possible, demanding no sacrifice of any kind. For how could it be a sacrifice, asks the *Course*, to substitute the peace and joy of reality for the painful illusions of the ego?

The *Course's* view of healing, then, is radically different from the usual views of the world. The world sees sickness and healing as originating in the body; the *Course* sees them as originating in the mind. "Sickness is of the mind," it repeats again and again. It is the mind which is really in need of healing.

From the perspective of the perennial wisdom this

radically different claim makes perfect sense. For if our true nature or self remains unchanged and joyous while part of the mind dreams of being trapped in a finite, suffering body, then an awakening of the mind is needed, rather than a change in the body. The body is merely a fragment of a dream, which we have mistaken for our Self. The *Course* therefore offers a path of healing for our minds that will allow us to awaken from this dream of sickness, suffering, and separation from God.

The *Course* was written through a process of inner dictation by a very reluctant academic psychologist, Helen Schuchman. Although she had an intense childhood yearning for religious understanding, she had long ago despaired of finding it and described herself as a Jewish atheist.

She was assisted during the writing by her colleague, William Thetford. Both were successful professors of medical psychology at Columbia University in New York. Neither had any intention of writing anything religious. Indeed, their lives and work were hardly models of spiritual well-being. They were caught up in the harried and often vicious competition and infighting that can occur in prestigious academic centers. Their relationships were certainly in need of healing, and they lived with significant personal and interpersonal strife. Yet as the *Course* says, "Tolerance for pain may be high, but it is not without limit. Eventually everyone realizes, however dimly, that there must be a better way."

That realization came to Bill Thetford one day when he suddenly announced to Helen, "There must be a better way of living, and I'm determined to find it." Helen responded, "I agree, and I'll help you find it."

A few weeks later, Helen started having a series of intense visual images. So vivid were these images that initially Helen feared she might be losing her sanity. However, with Bill's encouragement, she allowed them to unfold and they proved to be personally meaningful as well as helpful to others.

Finally, at the end of three months, Helen heard an

inner voice saying, "This is a course in miracles. Please take notes." Terrified once again that she was losing her mind, Helen resisted at first, but Bill finally convinced her to take down in shorthand the words she was hearing. Thus began a six-year collaborative process of transcribing and typing Helen's dictation—and *A Course in Miracles* was born. With its emphasis on healing, and particularly on healing relationships, the *Course* was clearly the guide to a better way of living that Helen and Bill had agreed to seek together. A fuller account of this process of birthing the *Course* is available in the book *Journey Without Distance*.

The *Course* itself consists of three books. The first is a text that lays out the thought system; the second is a practical workbook with a lesson for each day of the year; and the third is a teacher's manual that clarifies terms and discusses some of the principles of teaching. Two smaller booklets on psychotherapy and prayer, similarly scribed, are also available.

The language of the *Course* is traditionally Christian, reminiscent of the King James Bible. Some words and phrases sound dated, and the masculine pronoun is used exclusively. People who find the language initially offputting may want to personally translate terms that are difficult for them by substituting others, for example, "liberation" for "salvation," or "Child of God" for "Son of God."

However, when the initial antipathy to the traditional language passes, the poetic beauty of the language and the profound impact of the message are unveiled and free to work their transformations on the reader. Indeed, the quality of writing has been compared to some of the great works of English literature, and much of the *Course* is written in iambic pentameter like Shakespearean blank verse.

In Christian language and metaphor, the *Course* transmits the perennial wisdom in a way that makes it available to many people who would not otherwise be able to hear it. Yet the *Course* also acknowledges the value and validity of other paths and makes no claims for

exclusivity. Indeed, its message of healing for all people argues against excluding anyone.

Because its message is universal, the *Course* echoes themes and ideas found at the core of the great religions. It also contains philosophical and psychological insights on a par with both ancient wisdom and recent research. In short, the *Course* is an extremely rich, yet eminently practical path to healing and awakening. However, profound ideas follow one another in such rapid and poetic succession that it can be difficult to absorb more than a little at a time. Therefore, it is sometimes valuable to select brief excerpts for closer, more leisurely study, permitting the reader to more fully appreciate their impact and to focus on particular themes. This is the aim of *A Gift of Healing*.

The quotations included here focus specifically on healing. From the vast richness of the *Course*, we have selected those lines that seem to us most profound, moving, and poetic. But just as a few notes of melody cannot convey the majesty of a symphony, no selection can convey the breadth, depth, or many dimensions of *A Course in Miracles*. For that, one must turn to the original, and our hope is that *A Gift of Healing* will inspire those not already familiar with the *Course* to explore it directly.

A Course in Miracles has had an important influence on our lives, and we are grateful for the opportunity to share it in this way. We hope that the following passages will convey some of the beauty and benefits of the *Course*, and that they will offer to all who read them a gift of healing.