

Study Guide

Text—Introduction

A Course in Miracles begins with a surprisingly short introduction: only 124 words, with an average word-length of 4.4 letters. As an introduction to a 1256-page course, 124 terse words seems hardly adequate to cover the ground. Yet it does. The words of this Introduction, although they are very ordinary words in themselves, carry a world of meaning when put together. This Introduction is brief, but forceful.

Because each sentence is so packed with meaning, and in some cases even each word, I am going to take the Introduction sentence by sentence, and comment on the meaning of each sentence. In the study questions, I will ask you to think about each sentence, and to let some of that meaning sink in.

Before you begin detailed study, however, read the entire Introduction now. Read it slowly, and let yourself be aware of any feelings or thoughts it arouses. Read it two or three times, and only then return to the study questions that follow.

This is a course in miracles.

• Study Question •

(See the Answer Key at the end for suggested answers to these questions.)

1. What we are reading is “a course.” Drawing on what you know of courses you have taken in school, what do you think the word “course” may imply about this book and how you should read it?
2. This course is about miracles. At this point we do not know exactly what the author means by that word. Make a short list of what the word miracle means to you, realizing that as you study this course, it will redefine that term for you.

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A Course

A Course in Miracles identifies itself as “a course.” What do these two simple words imply? To me, they mean a lot—see my answer to the first question above in the Answer Key at the end of the commentary. A course is something related to school; it is associated with items such as teachers, pupils, curriculum, lessons, lesson plans, lab work, and graduation or “passing” the course. As we read *A Course in Miracles*, we will find that nearly every one of those terms is used by the Course in regard to itself. It really sees itself as “a course.”

Most important of all as we begin, the word “course” has associations with the idea of study. These books are meant to be studied, not simply read. Their purpose is not simply to entertain us, or even to inspire us, but primarily to teach us. We should emerge from this course having acquired a new body of knowledge or a new skill, just as a person taking a course in *Everyday Auto Repair* ends up able to perform routine repairs on their own car.

Let's not overlook the little word “a,” which is quite significant! The title is not “The Course in Miracles,” but “A Course in Miracles.” This lets us know that the author does not see this course as

the only course in miracles; it is just one of a group. In other words, the Course does not present itself as the sole source of knowledge, the only truth, or the only way to God, as do many religions.

In the third volume, *Manual for Teachers*, the Course describes itself in relation to other spiritual teachings:

This is a manual for a special curriculum, intended for teachers of a special form of the universal course. There are many thousands of other forms, all with the same outcome (M-1.4.1-2).

“Many thousands of other forms”! Clearly, the Course recognizes that it is not the only spiritual teaching, not even one of just a few valid forms. There are many thousands of other forms which all have “the same outcome.” They all are valid teachings that bring their students to the same goal, which we might call perfection or enlightenment. A Course in Miracles is just one form of “the universal course.” This non-exclusive, global-minded attitude of the Course is one of the things that drew me to it initially, and continues to hold my respect.

In Miracles

If this is “a course in miracles,” rather than a course in auto repair, what does that imply about what we are to be learning? The rather startling answer is, we are learning to perform miracles! Now, we have yet to define “miracle,” but let that notion sink in: People who study this course are learning how to perform miracles. Pretty brash title, isn't it? Someone—the author of these books—is daring to say that he can teach us to do miracles.

As I study these books, I need to remember their purpose: To teach me to do miracles. There will be times, probably, when I forget that, when I get bogged down in trying to solve my personal problems, or find myself side-tracked into theological speculations. The purpose of the Course isn't to make me a master theologian, however; it is to teach me to do miracles. Its purpose is not to help me find a better job or make more money or meet my soul mate; its purpose is to teach me to do miracles.

What does the Course mean by “miracles”? The meaning will be fairly plain after we study the first section of the Text, “Principles of Miracles.” To give a brief preview, however, the Course is not referring to miracles as commonly understood—the kind we read about in the Bible, or the phenomena involved in selecting saints in the Catholic Church, such as bleeding palms or subsisting on nothing but the communion wafer. The Course's meaning is much more inward. It still involves a divine intervention, and transcends natural laws. But a miracle as the Course understands it is far more concerned with changing our minds, with changing how we think and perceive, than with any change in our physical circumstances. Any such outward change is little more than a side-effect of the actual miracle, which takes place within our minds. Thus, one of the most frequently quoted lines in the Course says:

Therefore, seek not to change the world, but choose to change your mind about the world (T-21.In.1:7).

Miracles do change things; they change minds. Changed minds result in a changed world, because the mind is the source of the world we see, as the Course tells us over and over. The Course

does not want to deal with symptoms (outward things); it wants to change the source (the mind). That is why it says:

"This is a course in cause and not effect" (T-21.VII.7:8).

It is a required course.

• **Study Question** •

3. How do you feel about being told that you are required to study this curriculum? Make a note of any negative reactions, and any positive ones as well.

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These words may seem confusing to some people, especially in the light of the statement (mentioned above) that the Course is only one among thousands of forms of the universal course. My understanding is that it is the universal course that is "required." This line most definitely does not mean that everyone is required to be a student of *A Course in Miracles*; many statements in the Course contradict such an idea.

These lines from the Manual for Teachers may help our understanding further:

There is a course for every teacher of God. The form of the course varies greatly. So do the particular teaching aids involved. But the content of the course never changes. Its central theme is always, "God's Son is guiltless, and in his innocence is his salvation." It can be taught by actions or thoughts; in words or soundlessly; in any language or in no language; in any place or time or manner (M-1.3:1-6).

There is, in reality, just one lesson for us all to learn: "God's Son is guiltless, and in his innocence is his salvation." Every spiritual teaching is teaching that lesson in some form. It may not even use the words "guilt" or "innocence," yet its central theme is, nonetheless, guiltlessness. Guiltlessness is the only lesson to be learned; therefore it is a "required" lesson. As we will see in a moment, however, there's another sense in which even the form of the universal course that we follow is required of us.

Only the time you take it is voluntary. Free will does not mean that you can establish the curriculum. It means only that you can elect what you want to take at a given time.

• **Study Question** •

4. Think of these lines in regard to your spiritual development. According to the Course, you do have free will in one area, but not in another. What are you free to choose, and what are you not free to choose? What does this tell you about your rate of spiritual progress?

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The Course tells us that the form we follow is chosen for us, not by us:

Allen Watson's Commentaries on the Text of *A Course in Miracles*

As the course emphasizes, you are not free to choose the curriculum, or even the form in which you will learn it. — (M-2.3:6)

That statement is a reference to the very Introduction we are studying, making its meaning quite clear. The form in which we learn the universal lesson is chosen for us; we are not free to choose it for ourselves. That makes a certain sense if you think about it. Who is likely to know best which form will work for you: You? Or God? Originally the line about "required course" came in answer to a question Helen Schucman (the scribe) asked the author, "I assume this course is optional?" "No," she was told, for her it was "a required course." It was the form chosen for her.

It has been my experience that the Course is not for everyone. It has also been my experience that many people resist accepting the Course as their form of spiritual path, but nevertheless cannot seem to escape from its influence. I think something within us simply knows the right path when we find it, and won't let us reject it.

Of course we cannot decide what the curriculum is! It makes sense if you think about what we are learning: the true nature of reality. If we could choose that it would mean we could change the nature of reality! Truth is truth. We can't change it; we can only choose when, in time, we learn it.

We can't choose what we learn, but we can choose when we learn it. That's why we can't blame anyone for our lack of spiritual progress except ourselves. The entire Course assumes that we do have the power to choose. In fact, it tells us, "The power of decision is your one remaining freedom as a prisoner of this world" (T-12.VII.9:1). The climax of the Text is its final section, "Choose Once Again." The Course even tells us that coming to a proper understanding of our power of decision is one way of describing the whole purpose of the Course:

This course attempts to teach no more than that the power of decision cannot lie in choosing different forms of what is still the same illusion and the same mistake (T-31.IV.8:3).

Therefore, although we cannot choose the curriculum, one of the primary lessons of the Course is that our choices determine our experience in this world.

The course does not aim at teaching the meaning of love, for that is beyond what can be taught. It does aim, however, at removing the blocks to the awareness of love's presence, which is your natural inheritance.

• Study Question •

5. What are some of the "blocks to the awareness of love's presence" that you are aware of in your life?

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These lines define the direction and goal of the entire Course. Interestingly enough, the Course begins by stating that its aim is not to teach the meaning of love. That might surprise you. The Course cannot teach the meaning of love, it says, because love's meaning cannot be taught. Love is

not something that can be acquired through a learning process. Rather, love can only be recognized. The Course explains:

Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all of the barriers within yourself that you have built against it. It is not necessary to seek for what is true, but it is necessary to seek for what is false (T-16.IV.6:1-2).

Love is already present in us; in fact, the Course tells us, love is what we are. So it isn't necessary to seek for love or to learn love's meaning. All that is needed is to remove what is hiding love, and love will become evident without any need at all for learning. The Course even says that true learning is, in this world, unlearning! (M-4.X.3:7)

Love is not learned. Its meaning lies within itself. And learning ends when you have recognized all it is not. That is the interference; that is what needs to be undone. Love is not learned, because there never was a time in which you knew it not (T-18.IX.1:1-5).

The opposite of love is fear, but what is all-encompassing can have no opposite.

The Course often contrasts love and fear. "What is all-encompassing" obviously refers to love. This appears to be contradictory: fear is love's opposite, but love cannot have an opposite. The reconciliation of those two statements lies in the realization that fear is an illusion; fear is not real. The Course teaches an uncompromising non-dualism, which means, in essence, that if something is real, its opposite cannot be real. If God is real, there can be no devil; if good is real, there can be no evil; if life is real, there can be no death. And, if love is real, there can be no fear. If love is real, only love exists; it is "all-encompassing."

This non-dualism is made evident in the self-summary paragraph that follows in the Introduction.

**This course can therefore be summed up very simply in this way:
Nothing real can be threatened.
Nothing unreal exists.
Herein lies the peace of God (T-in.2:1-4).**

• Study Question •

6. If these words are true, can anything which is perishable, such as your body or the physical universe, be "real" in the Course's sense of the word?
7. Why does the peace of God lie in these two simple thoughts?

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The Course summarizes its message, and does so in two simple sentences. Simple, yet incredibly profound! In the first sentence, "Nothing real can be threatened," there are no complex words. Yet

the words have profound implications. They speak directly about the nature of reality. Let me paraphrase: "Anything that is real cannot be threatened."

Notice the word "therefore" in the first line of the paragraph; this self-summary is based on the preceding lines. In the light of the statement that love is all-encompassing and has no opposite, we can confidently interpret this sentence to mean, "Only love is real and cannot be threatened." Love cannot be destroyed or altered. It cannot be endangered. The Course will tell us before long that love is what you are (T-6.I.13:2). Therefore, you cannot be threatened; you are, in reality, invulnerable. "His Love remains the only thing there is. Fear is illusion" (M-18.3:11-12).

The sentence implies also that anything that can be threatened is not real! If a thing can be broken or destroyed, if it can be hurt in any way, in the Course's view of things, it isn't real. That's hard to swallow, because it means that the physical universe, our bodies, and even our emotional states are not real. Hard to accept, and yet, to the degree that we can accept it, it brings us great peace. What changes is not real; what changes is not me. My body ages and stops, but I do not. I am real, therefore I cannot be threatened.

"Nothing unreal exists." Anything that can be threatened is unreal; therefore, anything that can be threatened doesn't really exist. Because of that, the apparent "loss" of anything is really the loss of nothing. If it can be lost, it wasn't real. The Course teaches quite clearly: "There is no loss; to think there is, is a mistake" (T-26.II.3:2).

This realization, the Course says, is what brings about the peace of God. Imagine the peace you would feel if you knew, for certain, that nothing real can be threatened and nothing unreal exists. Put yourself into that scene; imagine what it would be like to have that certainty. Such unshakable inner peace is a goal of the Course. Wouldn't you like to live with the utter absence of fear? It's a great deal more than a calm feeling; it is like nothing you have ever experienced before, and it awakens your mind to God's peace. The Course leads you to God's peace by teaching you that reality is perfectly safe, and fear is wholly unreal.

Answer Key

1. Some things the word "course" implies for me are:
 - It is meant to be studied, not just read through once.
 - There is a progressive plan in its writing.
 - The material should probably be studied in the order in which it is presented.
 - There may be accompanying exercises of some kind (the Workbook).
 - A course has a teacher; I am a student of that teacher.
 - The books attempt to impart a specific body of knowledge.

Allen Watson's Commentaries on the Text of *A Course in Miracles*

2. Before studying the Course, the word "miracle" had the following meanings for me: something out of the ordinary, an act of God that breaks into normal life and transcends natural laws; something spectacular; something rare and unexpected; examples were things like walking on water, changing water to wine, raising the dead, or the parting of the Red Sea.

4. We are free to choose when we learn our lessons; we are not free to decide what the lessons are. Our spiritual progress, then, is determined by our own choice.

5. You might list such things as fear, anxiety, guilt, anger, unforgiveness, or sickness.

6. No. The Course makes this very point in the Text: "The world as you perceive it cannot have been created by the Father, for the world is not as you see it. God created only the eternal, and everything you see is perishable" (T-11.VII.1:1-2). Accepting that the entire world we see and experience every day is not real is extremely difficult. It isn't necessary to accept the idea right away to benefit from the Course, but it is important, I believe, to at least acknowledge that the Course does teach this idea, even if we cannot (yet) accept it.

7. Everything real is eternal and cannot be threatened, and therefore we are always perfectly safe and at peace. The message of the Course is that the world that seems to be apart from God, or in opposition to Him, is impossible and does not exist; only what He created is real. Therefore sin is not real; evil is not real; hell is not real.