

Commentary

ACIM[®] Manual for Teachers

3. *What Are the Levels of Teaching?*

Explanation of underlining, italics and footnote formats can be found at the end of the commentary. See also the note there on the effects of switching from the FIP edition to the Complete and Annotated Edition. Please note that the FIP and CE versions may differ in where paragraph breaks occur.

Overview

Not all of our interactions with other people are on the same level. We don't relate to the grocery clerk in the same way we do with a family member. Realistically, then, we can't expect the same level of teaching and learning about our Oneness in every relationship. This section presents three different levels at which learning occurs and shows us that it can occur no matter how deep or casual we may think the relationship is.

Paragraph 1

The teachers of God have no set teaching level.¹ ²Each teaching-learning situation involves a different relationship at the beginning, although the ultimate goal is always the same: to make of the relationship a holy relationship in which both can look upon the Son of God as sinless. ³There is no one from whom a teacher of God cannot learn, so there is no one whom he cannot teach. ⁴However, from a practical point of view, he cannot meet everyone, nor can everyone find him. ⁵Therefore, the plan includes very specific contacts to be made for each teacher of God. ⁶There are no accidents in salvation. ⁷Those who are to meet will meet, because together they have the potential for a holy relationship. ⁸They are ready for each other.

The occurrence of a teaching-learning situation does not require a particular level of relationship. It can occur at any level (1:1). Relationships vary, but all have the same goal (1:2).

What is that goal? The previous two sections have told us. The goal is "to make of the relationship a holy relationship in which both can look upon the Son of God as sinless" (1:2). *Both* participants must not judge the other. They forget the past. They must *join* in a

¹ Based on the discussion in this section, the term "levels of teaching" refers to the *amount* of teaching and learning taking place (note that at each level, the two people spend more time together), so that the higher the level, the *more* teaching and learning is occurring.

mutual expression of love. I've often referred to it as falling in love with everyone.² Such a connection can happen with anyone at all because we can learn the lesson from anyone, and so we also can teach it (1:3). Connection is less "intense" with a casual relationship, but the lesson still is exchanged.

"From a practical point of view," however, it is impossible to meet *everyone*, nor can everyone in the world encounter you (1:4). Therefore, in God's plan, there are specific individuals whom He singles out to come in contact with you in your role as a teacher of God (1:5).

I sometimes hear people say of a particular encounter with someone, "I think we were meant to meet." Maybe we merely need to assume this is *always* true! Since "There are no accidents in salvation" (1:6), and God assigns "very specific contacts" for us, then God must intend us to engage in teaching-learning with everyone we encounter or think of.

Does this idea require that God be a separate, giant Being who somehow keeps simultaneous track of billions of individuals? I tend not to see God as an amplified human being, a giant daddy in the sky, making individual daily plans for me and billions of people. Instead, I see God as Life itself, with a built-in directional impulse that spontaneously seeks to grow, improve, heal and unite. We are part of God, or God is what we are, driving ever upward and outward, expanding, creating, and extending Itself. God isn't "personal"; being a person is a crippling limitation. Personhood requires separation and otherness. God is super-personal or trans-personal. God contains person-ness, but it does not limit Him. The language used in this passage, for me, poorly represents what is going on. God is not a super Being micromanaging our lives. God is Beingness Itself, and the upward evolutionary impulse is what brings us together.

When a teacher is ready the right pupil appears. Why? Because Life pushes forth in evolutionary exuberance when it detects an opportunity for advancement. The same force that evolved complex organisms from single cells is at work in uniting people. So no; there are no accidents. The life force of the Universe is always at work. People who "have the potential for a holy relationship" inevitably *will meet* because "they are ready for each other" (1:7-8).

² I wrote an article years ago by that title. I'll email a copy to you if you ask.

Paragraph 2

² The simplest level of teaching appears to be quite superficial. ²It consists of what seem to be very casual encounters: a “chance” meeting of two apparent strangers in an elevator, a child who is not looking where he is going running into an adult “by accident,” two students who “happen” to walk home together. ³These are not chance happenings. ⁴Each of them has the potential for becoming a teaching-learning situation. ⁵Perhaps the seeming strangers in the elevator will smile to one another; perhaps the adult will not scold the child for bumping into him; perhaps the students will become friends. ⁶Even at the level of the most casual encounter, it is possible for two people to lose sight of separate interests, if only for a moment. ⁷That moment will be enough. ⁸Salvation has come.

We begin with the most straightforward level of teaching (2:1). It happens when two people have a “casual” encounter. Such encounters may seem superficial, but they are not. Jesus gives several examples (2:2). Pay attention to the quotation marks around certain words. The examples he gives are:

- a “chance” meeting of two apparent strangers in an elevator.
- a child, oblivious to his surroundings, runs into an adult “by accident.”
- two students who just “happen” to walk home together

He declares that “these are not chance happenings” (2:3).³ Each encounter has the potential for teaching-learning to take place (2:4). The word “potential” is a significant clue. The teaching-learning depends on how we react in such situations. Do we choose to join or to remain separate? We need to recognize that every encounter has this potential. Jesus said as much:

“When you meet anyone, remember it is a holy encounter. As you see him, you will see yourself. As you treat him, you will treat yourself. As you think of him, you will think of yourself. Never forget this, for in him you will find yourself or lose sight of yourself. Whenever two Sons of God meet, they are given another chance at salvation. Do not leave anyone without giving salvation to him and receiving it yourself. For I am always there with you, in remembrance of you.” T-8.II.6:1–2 (CE)

“When you meet anyone, remember...”! Every encounter has the potential to become a teaching-learning situation. What does that look like? Two strangers in the elevator “smile to one another.” A jarred adult elects not to scold the careless child. The randomly met students become friends (2:5). In each the situation, “two people lose sight of separate interests, if only for a moment” (2:6). That’s all it takes! “Salvation has come” (2:7–8). Everyone can do “teaching” like this.

³ FIP has “encounters” where CE has “happenings.” No significant difference that I can see.

Paragraph 3

3 It is difficult to understand that levels of teaching the universal course is a concept as meaningless in reality as is time.⁴ ²The illusion of one permits the illusion of the other. ³In time, the teacher of God seems to begin to change his mind about the world with a single decision, and then learn more and more about the new direction as he teaches it. ⁴We have covered the illusion of time already,⁵ but the illusion of levels of teaching seems to be something different. ⁵Perhaps the best way to show that these levels cannot really exist is simply to say that any level of the teaching-learning situation is part of God's plan for Atonement, and His plan can have no levels, being a reflection of His will. ⁶Salvation is always ready and always there. ⁷God's teachers work at different levels, but the result is always the same.

Before exploring the remaining two levels of teaching-learning, Jesus explains a related idea: the relationship between the illusion of time and the illusion of levels. Although the connection isn't apparent, he feels it will be helpful to see how they relate to one another. He states that the concept of levels of teaching is meaningless, an illusion like time (3:1). Back in Manual Chapter 2, he dismissed time as an illusion. He declared that "The world of time is the world of illusion" (M-2.3:1). In an ancient instant, we made a mistaken choice. Time goes backward to that instant. We relive that instant again and again as if it were present. He declared we have already made the right choice and learned the truth, but we are still free "to decide when you want to learn it" (M-2.3:7).

So, how are levels of teaching like time? It is only the illusion of time that permits us to perceive levels of teaching (3:2). In time, it seems as if we change our minds and learn with a single decision. We then learn more and more about the lesson *as we teach it*(3:3). In reality, we have already learned it thoroughly! What is changing isn't what we are learning; it's our *acceptance* of the learning that occurred "in that ancient instant" that we now are reliving (M-2.4:5). God's plan of salvation is already complete. It is "always ready and always there" (3:6). Being complete, it cannot have "levels" (3:5).

What we experience as different levels of teaching and learning have the same result: We accept the Atonement as complete, at least at that moment (3:7). A shared smile in the elevator can trigger our awareness of our shared identity in Christ, just like a years-long holy relationship. We *seem* to have differing degrees of "waking up." But at all levels, waking is the recognition that "Salvation is always ready and always there" (3:6).

⁴. "Levels of teaching" implies more teaching and learning on the higher levels, just as time implies more and more learning as time proceeds. Both therefore must be illusions simply because all learning is already complete, having been completed the instant God gave His Answer to the separation. Strictly speaking, then, there are no gradations of learning.

⁵. See M-2.2-4.

Paragraph 4

4 Each teaching-learning situation is maximal in the sense that each person involved will learn the most that he can from the other person at that time. ²In this sense, and in this sense only, we can speak of levels of teaching. ³Using the term in this way, the second level of teaching is a more sustained relationship, in which for a time two people enter into a fairly intense teaching-learning situation, and then appear to separate. ⁶As with the first level, these meetings are not accidental, nor is what appears to be the end of the relationship. ⁷Again, each has learned the most he can at the time. ⁶Yet all who meet will someday meet again, for it is the destiny of all relationships to become holy. ⁷God is not mistaken in His Son.

We've compared the illusions of levels and time. The point is that, no matter what the level *seems* to be, we will always learn all we can at the time (4:1). We are tapping into the already accomplished salvation of God. At the "lower" levels, we may seem to learn less than in "higher" levels, but we are learning the same thing. Levels exist only to the extent that we learn the most we can at the time. Bear that in mind as we look into the "higher" levels. There is no qualitative difference between the levels.

"...the second level of teaching is a more sustained relationship" (4:3). This level goes beyond casual encounters. For instance, the two students who walk home together may become friends, a more sustained relationship. In the second level, two people come together "for a time." They "enter into a fairly intense teaching-learning situation, and then appear to separate" (4:3).

I think everyone has had such "Level Two" teaching-learning experiences. There are many people with whom I interacted in a "fairly intense" way: school friends I spent years with and haven't seen since; a Christian college buddy I once called "twin of my soul" that I have not been in touch with for at least 40 years; my first wife; Lynne, a friend and lover with whom I first studied the Course, who passed away in 1994; her ex-husband, who was one of my good friends for several years. You get the idea; we could all make long lists.

I want to point out a significant phrase: "and then appear to separate." *Appear to*. There is a profound truth lurking in those words: We *never* separate, though we appear to! Not even in so-called death. That is one corollary of the fact of Oneness. "Yet all who meet will someday meet again, for it is the destiny of all relationships to become holy" (4:6). I relish the notion of reunion with *everyone* I have known or will know. We will

⁶ Both this second level and the third level may seem to be describing a typical romantic relationship, yet we need to remember that they are levels of *teaching* in a *teaching-learning situation*. In other words, these relationships are ones in which a teacher is teaching his way or path to a learner, even if that may be happening only informally. It is possible for these relationships to be romantic ones, but they can take many forms.

⁷ The end of the relationship is not an accident because, as the next sentence implies, the two have reached the limit of their current ability to learn from each other, and they have been together only for the sake of that learning.

enjoy a holy relationship, whatever the quality of the relationship in time. Think of people you have known, loved, and lost. You will meet again in a holy relationship! Isn't that fantastic news? Think too of people you have disliked; you will fall in love with them, too, and they with you.

Just as with Level One encounters, "these meetings are not accidental, nor is what appears to be the end of the relationship" (3:4). Note that. The end isn't accidental. We may be used to the idea that we are meant to meet the people we meet, but have you ever considered that you were meant *to lose touch* with the people with whom you have lost touch? Intriguing idea, isn't it? The following sentence suggests *why* that might be: "... each has learned the most he can at the time" (4:5). What draws people together in the first place, whether for a few moments or much longer, is the mutual ability to learn from and with each other. That ability to learn from one another also seems to be what holds a relationship together. The closer the "fit" for learning, the longer the relationship. When they have learned all they can at that time, the relationship ends. It's a natural process.

The last sentence, 4:7, tells why the fact that every relationship is destined to become holy (4:6) means that we can depend on meeting again some day. It is true because "God is not mistaken in His Son." God didn't create anyone who does not fit in a holy relationship. Our return to Oneness is guaranteed by God.

Paragraph 5

5 The third level of teaching occurs in relationships which, once they are formed, are lifelong. ²These are teaching-learning situations in which each person is given a chosen learning partner who presents him with unlimited opportunities for learning. ³These relationships are generally few, because their existence implies that those involved have reached a stage simultaneously in which the teaching-learning balance is actually perfect.⁸ ⁴This does not mean that they necessarily recognize this; in fact, they generally do not. ⁵They may even be quite hostile to each other for some time, and perhaps for life. ⁶Yet should they decide to learn it, the perfect lesson is before them and can be learned. ⁷And if they decide to learn that lesson, they become the saviors of the teachers who falter and may even seem to fail. ⁸No teacher of God can fail to find the help he needs.

Now we come to the third (apparent) level: a relationship that endures for life once formed (5:1). We don't have many of these (5:3). For this level, the teaching-learning balance has to be perfect! That is rare. These people are learning partners who present us

⁸. "Teaching-learning balance" is a term used in education, often referring to a balance between teachers giving information to pupils and pupils expending their own time and effort to make sense of that information. Thus, there is a good teaching-learning balance when the two parties are giving equally to the process. This enables what is given by the teacher to be fully received by the pupil. As used above, however, the term seems to signify more of a balance between the teacher's *ability* to teach and the pupil's *ability* to learn, so that what the teacher is *able to teach* the pupil is *able to learn*.

with “unlimited opportunities for learning” (5:2). You might expect these to be profound, loving relationships, but that isn't always true. The two people may not realize how well-matched they are for potential learning; “in fact, often they do not” (5:4). Level Three teaching-learning partners may be “quite hostile to each other for some time, and perhaps for life” (5:5).

That's very interesting. It makes me think differently about strained relationships between parents and children, or between siblings! Such relationships are lifelong, yet they can be quite hostile. When we see them as perfectly balanced for teaching and learning, it can transform our understanding.

Even in a relationship that has been hostile for a long time, “the perfect lesson is before them and can be learned” (5:6). Some succeed at learning the lesson; some “falter and may even seem to fail” (5:7). Those who learn it “become the saviors of the teachers” who aren't learning the lesson. We can learn from this that even if a relationship ends without resolving its hostility, for instance, by death, the failure is only a *seeming* failure. The healing is inevitable. It has already happened outside of time.

I can see how becoming saviors plays out in life. Imagine a mother-daughter relationship that goes through challenging times, lasting years, but in the end achieves mutual forgiveness and love. It happens. People with that kind of experience can be terrific helps to others who are struggling in a similar relationship. If we look for help in our conflicted relationships, we will find it. “No teacher of God can fail to find the help he needs” (5:8).

One closing thought: None of these three levels sounds like a *formal* teaching relationship. Perhaps the savior of teachers who are faltering fits the pattern. But even there, neither is called a pupil; one is a teacher, the other a savior. I would not *exclude* a formal teacher-pupil relationship from all of this, but I would not *limit* the third level to formal teaching relationships. *All* relationships are destined to become genuine holy relationships, “in which both can look upon the Son of God as sinless” (1:2).

Legend:

Light underscoring indicates emphasis that appears in the Urtext or shorthand notes.

The Text is taken from the Circle of Atonement's Complete and Annotated Edition (which I refer to as the "CE" for "Complete Edition" or "Circle Edition"). Please be aware that, even when the wording is identical to the FIP version, the division into paragraphs is often entirely different in the CE, which restores the paragraph breaks found in the original notes. This results in different reference numbering as well. I will indicate for each paragraph the corresponding sentences in the Foundation for Inner Peace (FIP) edition. You should be able to locate specific sentences in that edition if you need to, with a minimum of visual clutter in the commentary. References to quotations are from the CE unless another version is being quoted, in which case that version is indicated.

Footnotes by the commentary author are shown in this font and size. Other footnotes come from the Complete Edition itself.

Effects of Differing Editions of the Course

There were significant changes made in the CE, although for the most part there was no alteration in the meaning of the text, and the *Manual for Teachers* had far fewer changes. There are some changes in section and paragraph breaks and sentence structure that result in different numbering in references to the same text in the two editions. When there is a major difference I will indicate it with a footnote.

I have attempted for all references to add a separate FIP reference if it differs from the CE reference, but I may have missed some. If so, I apologize. Please let me know of any referencing problems you find.

I have also tried to edit my commentary so as to reflect any wording changes in the CE. For instance, the CE Text restored the plural use of "you" where the FIP had substituted the phrase "you and your brother." One such instance will illustrate the kind of change, significant in actual words but nearly identical in overall meaning:

FIP: Thus you and your brother but shared a qualified entente, in which a clause of separation was a point you both agreed to keep intact.

CE: You shared a qualified entente, in which a clause of separation was a point which you had both agreed to keep intact.