

What Is Death?

by Allen Watson

Introduction

Death is not a subject we like to consider. Yet the Course discusses death a lot; there are 491 occurrences of the word in the Course material, and 143 occurrences together of the words “dead,” “die,” and “dying.” And—like it or not—death is very much a part of our experience in this world. So I decided that a study of what the Course has to teach us about death, and how we can use that teaching in our lives, would be useful, not only for myself, but for many of our readers as well.

This booklet will be in five chapters. In the first two chapters, I will cover the Course’s theory of death, which might also be called “death in the abstract.” We will look together at what the Course has to say about death: what it is and is not; what dies; why death appears in the world; the ego’s connection to death; and what happens at physical death. Chapter Three will discuss how we, as Course students, can deal with death in various forms, which might be called “death in the concrete.” Here we will deal with more practical issues: dealing with the death of a loved one; facing our own bodily death; and helping a friend in grief. Chapter Four lists some common questions about death, with the best answers I can give. In Chapter Five, the booklet closes with a consideration of what the Course says about how death appears to our right mind.

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Chapter One Our Mind's Beliefs About Death

The Course has a lot of things to say about death as an abstract concept. These teachings of the Course must, quite naturally, form the basis of the Course's approach to the subject, so we will consider them first.

To begin with, let's take a look at what the Course has to say about our conventional thoughts about death. In our minds, death is tightly linked to our physicalness; bodies die. As we shall soon see, however, to the Course death is not what we think it is.

In This World, Death is a Fact of Life

Over and over again the Course paints a rather grim and gloomy picture of this world. Death, it says, "seems to hold all living things within its withered hand; all hopes and wishes in its blighting grasp; all goals perceived but in its sightless eyes" (Workbook, p. 302; W-pI.163:2:2). With fear in our hearts, we look out and "perceive a fearful world, held cruelly in death's sharp-pointed, bony fingers" (Workbook, p. 349; W-pI.189.5:4). The Course, in the end, does not agree with this picture, but it insists that this is how we all see the world: in the grips of death.

All things but death are seen to be unsure, too quickly lost however hard to gain, uncertain in their outcome, apt to fail the hopes they once engendered, and to leave the taste of dust and ashes in their wake, in place of aspirations and of dreams. But [only] death is counted on. For it will come with certain footsteps when the time has come for its arrival. It will never fail to take all life as hostage to itself (Workbook, p. 302; W-pI.163.3).

Nearly everyone knows the saying that nothing is certain but death and taxes. Everything dies. Everyone dies. It's just something we have to accept. We all try to think about it as little as possible. We pretend as long as we can that death doesn't exist, and then, finally, we stutter to a halt, gasp our last breath, and die. Our brightest hopes are tinged with death's dark colors. In our happiest moments the thought that nothing lasts forever eats like slow acid at the core of our happiness. At the end, we all know, everything and everyone we hold dear will shrivel up and be gone, and at last it will happen to us. If we consider this view of death "realistic," there are no real grounds for hope or joy or peace.

No wonder we find peace and joy to be so elusive, for while we go about seeking them, we leave our belief in death—the one thing sure to make peace and joy impossible—unquestioned and intact in a locked filing cabinet in our minds.

It is the one fixed, unchangeable belief of the world that all things in it are born only to die. This is regarded as “the way of nature,” not to be raised to question, but to be accepted as the “natural” law of life (Manual, p. 63; M-27:1:4, 5).

In other words, to us death is a fact of life. The very statement shows the absurdity of the belief. How could life’s opposite be an essential part of life? Yet we believe it. We regard it as something “not to be raised to question.” Anyone who questions the reality of death risks having everyone else question their sanity. After all, what do our eyes tell us? Is there anyone who has escaped death, apart from an unverifiable story about Jesus? Many modern Christians question even that story, considering it a myth, no more than a symbolic story, and certainly not literally true. To nearly everyone, the reality of death is unquestionable. Try as we may to suppress our awareness of it, the grinning skull of death stares back at us in every moment of life, even the happiest ones, leeching the life out of them and polluting them with its rottenness.

Death stares at them as every moment goes irrevocably past their grasping hands, which cannot hold them back. And they feel fear as bodies change and sicken. For they sense the heavy scent of death upon their hearts (Song of Prayer, p. 15; S-3.I.2:4–6).

While death is not a fact, it *is* a fact that we believe in it, and that “the heavy scent of death” permeates our lives with its rotten odor of decay. Unless we are willing to face this belief and to open it up for healing, it will persistently stand as a block to our awareness of love.

Our Denial of Death

The Course faces our belief in death head on. It acknowledges that belief and states it far more strongly than most of us would be willing to state it. The language of the Course, in speaking about death, could even be called deliberately shocking and crude.

[Death] holds an image of the Son of God in which he is “laid to rest” in devastation’s arms, where worms wait to greet him and to last a little while by his destruction. Yet the worms as well are doomed to be destroyed as certainly. And so do all things live because of death. Devouring is nature’s “law of life” (Manual, p. 63; M-27.3:4–7).

We do not like to think about the fact that everything in this world lives by eating other living things. We all live by killing things and eating them, even if we eat only vegetables. We try to look on Nature as a thing of beauty, but we cannot deny the fact that

“devouring is nature’s ‘law of life.’” And eventually, something will eat us, only to be eaten in turn.

The Text describes those who believe in death as “black-draped ‘sinners,’ the ego’s mournful chorus, plodding so heavily away from life, dragging their chains and marching in the slow procession that honors their grim master, lord of death” (Text, p. 388; T-19.IV(C).2:4). Of course we do not like the idea, but we all believe that death is our master. Our belief is not just a *belief*, it is an “unrecognized dedication to death” (Text, p. 389; T-19.IV(C).4:5). It is, as these and other passages suggest, our *religion*.

The dedication is “unrecognized.” And that is, no doubt, the reason the Course speaks so strongly and so often about our belief in death. We believe in death, we are even dedicated to it and serve our “grim master, lord of death,” but we do not realize what we are doing! Our denial of death is monumental in intensity and far-reaching in scope. We believe in it but we resolutely refuse to face the fact of our belief. Ernest Becker has written a Pulitzer-Prize-winning book entitled, *The Denial of Death*, in which he shows that our belief in death, and our failure to face that belief, is behind every kind of mental illness. He concludes that everyone is in denial of death, and everyone, to a greater or lesser degree, is out of touch with reality, or insane, because of it.

Yet if we do not deny death’s reality, if we confront it and force ourselves to admit its “reality,” we may be driven mad by that confrontation itself. If we attempt to view death realistically, the world becomes a charnel house, a planet soaked in blood (as Becker puts it), a mass feeding frenzy in which everything lives by devouring other life. Belief in death, whether confronted or denied, leads to madness.

Still, the Course tries to get us to confront our belief in death, and to end our denial of that belief. Why? Because, in its view, there is a place beyond the madness. There is “a better way.” If belief in death leads to madness, then it must be, not that we are doomed to insanity, but that the belief in death itself is insane. If believing in death goes hand in hand with madness, then the only sane thing to do is to question that belief.

Is it not madness to think of life as being born, aging, losing vitality, and dying in the end?...this is taken as the Will of God. And no one asks if a benign Creator could will this (Manual, p. 63; M-1:2, 6, 7).

Bodies Do Not Die

The Course's thinking about physical death is the reverse of our normal thinking about the matter. We see the death of bodies and conclude that death must therefore be real because we see it. The Course starts with the premise that only life, being created by God, is real. Therefore, death, life's opposite, cannot be real, and anything associated with death must also be unreal. In its thought, if bodies die, then bodies cannot be real, because life cannot culminate in its opposite. If we see death, then what we are seeing must be an illusion.

Everyone “knows” that bodies die. We see it happen. Someone we know was walking or talking, laughing with us, and then we saw their body motionless, cold, and lifeless. Dead. Sometimes we even spiritualize our belief in the death of bodies by telling ourselves that it is *only* the body that died, but the spirit lives on.

There is another way of looking at it: *The body does not die because it is not alive*. “The body neither lives nor dies, because it cannot contain you who are life” (Text, p. 96f; T-6.V(A).1:4).

Again the Course applies its entirely consistent and implacable logic. If death is not real, and the body seems to die, then the “life” of the body must not be real life. Life is life; it cannot become death. A thing cannot become its opposite. “Life makes not death, creating like itself” (Text, p. 462; T-23.IV.3:7). If something “dies” and decays, therefore, it was never alive to begin with.

The body no more dies than it can feel. It does nothing. Of itself it is neither corruptible nor incorruptible. It is nothing (Text, p. 389; T-19.IV(C).5:2–5).

The Course therefore dismisses the “death” of the body as irrelevant. The body cannot die because it is nothing. When we think of death, we inevitably think of the dissolution of the body. That isn’t death at all, in the Course’s view, because what “dies” was never alive in the first place. In the view of the Course, then, *nothing* that we think of as “alive” in the physical sense is really alive at all. Physical life only *seems* like life:

There is no life outside of Heaven. Where God created life, there life must be. In any state apart from Heaven life is illusion. At best it seems like life; at worst, like death. Yet both are judgments on what is not life, equal in their inaccuracy and lack of meaning. Life not in Heaven is impossible, and what is not in Heaven is not anywhere (Text, p. 459; T-23.II.19:1–6).

The savage picture that the world presents to us, in which life comes from devouring other life, is therefore completely inaccurate. If life apart from Heaven is illusion, then the world is nothing but illusion devouring illusion, and the death it pictures is not real. It is an illusion which we have imagined to be alive, and nothing more; what “dies,” then, is only the illusion of life apart from God. The Course describes the body and the world exactly like that:

What you have given “life” is not alive, and symbolizes but your wish to be alive apart from life, alive in death, with death perceived as life, and living, death (Text, p. 566; T-29.II.6:2).

To the Course, the body is nothing but “a parody of life which, in its lifelessness, is really death, conceived as real and given living form” (Text, p. 574; T-29.VII.5:3). Our bodies and this whole world, then, are simply the projection of our wish to be separate. There is no death in this world because nothing here is alive. Nothing is really here at all! Everything here is the illusory effect of the thought of separation in our minds.

There Is No Death

If in Heaven there is only life and no death, and if the seeming death in this world is nothing but illusion, the termination of something that was never alive, then we can see that there must be no death at all. And so the Course teaches us: “Salvation seeks to prove there is no death, and only life exists” (Text, p. 575; T-29.VII.10:2).

To paraphrase the words from the Introduction to the Text, “Nothing real can die. Nothing that dies exists.” “Only life exists.” The Course, as usual, is completely uncompromising about this.

If death is real for anything, there is no life. Death denies life. But if there is reality in life, death is denied. No compromise in this is possible. There is either a god of fear or One of Love. The world attempts a thousand compromises, and will attempt a thousand more. Not one can be acceptable to God's teachers, because not one could be acceptable to God (Manual, p. 63; M-27.4:2–8).

If death exists at all, life does not, because death is the absence of life. The contention the Course makes is that it is either one or the other, either death or life. “No compromise in this is possible.” If I can die, or if part of me can die, or if part of something that I love can die, then there is no God of Love, only a god of fear. Millions of people have felt exactly this sentiment when experiencing the apparent death of someone close to them. There is no more misguided statement than the words, “It’s God’s Will,” offered to someone in grief. However well-intentioned those words might be, they make God a monster to be feared, a tyrant who “holds your little life in his hand but by a thread, ready to break it off without regret or care, perhaps today” (Manual, p. 63; M-27.2:3), and who snatches away the things dearest to our hearts.

There is no death because what God created shares His life. There is no death because an opposite to God does not exist. There is no death because the Father and the Son are One (Workbook, p. 311; W-pI.167.1:5–7).

To affirm the reality of death is to affirm that an opposite to God exists. If “what God created shares His life,” and yet it dies, then something other than God, something more powerful than God, must be operating. But something more powerful than God must in fact *be* God, the real god, and this god must be a god of death instead of life. Thus, a belief in death’s reality is an attack on the godhood of God, and a denial of the God of Love.

So strongly is the Course opposed to any belief in death that it states our assignment as teachers of God in these terms: “Teacher of God, your one assignment could be stated thus: Accept no compromise in which death plays a part” (Manual, p. 64; M-27.7:1). When we realize that death is nothing more than our belief in separation from God our Source (see the second part of this chapter), this makes perfect sense. We are to accept no compromise in which separation from God is made real, no compromise in which an opposite to God seems to exist.

We have spoken of an unhealthy denial of death, in which we cover over and refuse to acknowledge our belief in death and our fear of it. We have said that the Course wants us to undo that kind of denial. It wants us to see and acknowledge the many ways we believe in death and pay deference to it. Yet in the sentence we just quoted, quite clearly, the Course is teaching us to deny any measure of reality to death; to refuse any compromise with the idea. It says this is our “one assignment.”

At first this may seem contradictory and confusing. Really, it’s quite simple. The Course says, “There is no death, but there is a belief in death” (Text, p. 46; T-3.VII.5:11). The Course is teaching us *not to deny* our belief in death, but it is also teaching us to *deny* death’s reality. What we say to ourselves is, “I have a belief in death, but there is no death.” We do not try to conceal our mistaken belief in death. That is false denial. But we do deny that death is real. We openly confront our mistake, and we correct it.

This is the proper use of denial. It is not used to hide anything, but to correct error (Text, p. 16; T-2.II.1:12,13).

Chapter Two

The Origins and Nature of Death

If death is not what we think it is, then what is it? The origin of everything in our experience, as the Course understands things, is the mind. This chapter summarizes the Course's message that death is really an impossible idea, specifically the idea of separation from God, Who is Life. The ego champions the idea of death because the ego's existence depends on the reality of separation from God, and therefore of separation from life. Death is part of the ego's overall attempt to replace God's reality and life with itself.

The ego is therefore attempting to kill God in order to obtain His life and to take His place. The ego attempts also to kill us (because our death will prove we have been separated from God). To this end it attempts to turn us from the innocent Son of God into guilty sinners who think we deserve to die.

Physical death, in this scenario, becomes simply an extreme form of self-imposed punishment for imaginary sins, the manifestation in form of the fundamental idea of death. The world, with its dog-eat-dog existence in which life survives by devouring other life, is likewise a manifestation of this same, underlying thought that our existence depends upon separation from God.

Let us now examine some of these points in more detail.

Death Is Only a Thought

If the "death" of the body is not really death, then what *is* death?

You think that death is of the body. Yet it is but an idea, irrelevant to what is seen as physical (Workbook, p. 311; W-pI.167.3:1,2).

Death is a thought... (Workbook, p. 302; W-pI.163.1:1).

Death isn't connected to physicality at all; it is a thought, an idea, and nothing more than that. Death is not an event in the physical world. It is the thought that life ends. It is the idea of life apart from the Source of life, God. It is the illusory expression of the idea of separation.

As it does in dealing with anything in this world, the Course insists that the way to deal with death is to deal with the thought of death in the mind, and not to seek to change the world at all. Death is simply a thought in our minds; it has no physical reality because physicality itself is not real.

Death is the state we chose, and still choose, when we wanted to be separate from God.

And death is the result of the thought we call the ego, as surely as life is the result of the Thought of God (Text, p. 388; T-19.IV(C)2:15).

What is death but total separation from life? What is the ego but total separation from God? The two things are the same. The ego *is* the thought of separation; the ego is death. “Death is the thought that you are separate from your Creator” (Workbook, p. 311; W-pI.167.4:1). To end our separation and to end the illusion of death are therefore the same thing.

Death is the ego’s defense against God’s life. It is an attack on life, an attempt to destroy it. The words from Lesson 136 below are written about sickness, but they apply equally well to death:

Sickness [or death] is not an accident. Like all defenses, it is an insane device for self-deception. And like all the rest, its purpose is to hide reality, attack it, change it, render it inept, distort it, twist it, or reduce it to a little pile of unassembled parts. The aim of all defenses is to keep the truth from being whole (Workbook, p. 250; W-pI.136.2:1–4).

The thought of death attempts not only to hide reality, but to change it; to take on qualities that do not belong to reality:

Death is the thought that you are separate from your Creator... It is the fixed belief ideas can leave their source, and take on qualities the source does not contain... (Workbook, p. 311; W-pI.167.4:1,3).

Death is nothing but a *thought*, a *belief*. God is Life; to experience death we would have to leave our Source, and somehow acquire characteristics God does not have, such as change, decay, and impermanence. Death, then, is the belief that we have done this.

And since death is only an idea in the mind, “...its origin is where it must be changed, if change occurs” (Workbook, p. 311; W-pI.167.3:5). Our minds can believe in death, but we cannot make death real. Earlier, we quoted this sentence: “There is no death, but there is a belief in death” (Text, p. 46; T-3.VII.5:11). It is the belief in death that must be changed, and that is all. Death is not a real problem; the problem is our belief in it. To change our minds about death is not a small thing, however. In fact, our belief in death is the root of *all illusions*.

Death is the central dream from which all illusions stem (Manual, p. 63; M-27.1:1).

Without the idea of death there is no world. All dreams will end with this one. This is salvation's final goal; the end of all illusions. And in death are all illusions born (Manual, p. 64; M-27.6:3–6).

Isn’t it amazing how, when you study some subject in the Course, you find that it is at the core of everything? It seems that the Course somehow manages to show that everything is “central.” Everything is linked to everything else. So now we read that death is the central dream; when this dream ends, all dreams end. So we aren’t just studying some peripheral subject here. We are hitting at the core of our dreams of separation.

We will be relinquishing our belief in death right up until the very end of our journey. That must be so because, when the dream of death is completely gone, all dreams will end; the journey will be over. Our job for now, then, is not to be *without* the belief in death, but to diligently seek, without guilt or fear about our current belief in death, to remove it from our minds. We may wonder how this “fixed, unchangeable belief” can be dislodged. But *how* it can be done is not our concern. We need only be willing to give up the belief, be willing to move in that direction. Forgiveness is the way we do this. As we look at all the things in us and around us that seem to attack life, to limit it or compromise it or end it, we can bring these things to the Holy Spirit and ask to see them differently, to be shown that these things have no real power.

The Thought of Death Takes Many Forms

Death as understood by the Course is far more than just physical death. It is the thought that life (unlimited, formless, eternal spirit, which includes joy, peace and love within itself) can in any way be threatened, damaged, lessened, limited, confined or destroyed:

Death is a thought that takes on many forms, often unrecognized. It may appear as sadness, fear, anxiety or doubt; as anger, faithlessness and lack of trust; concern for bodies, envy, and all forms in which the wish to be as you are not may come to tempt you. All such thoughts are but reflections of the worshipping of death as savior and as giver of release (Workbook, p. 302; W-pI.163.1:1–3).

From the root thought of death, many different forms spring forth. Sadness comes from the belief life ends. Fear is a form of the thought of death. Anxiety, clearly, is an anticipation of something ending or being taken away. Our lack of trust is based on a belief that we are vulnerable, which is the same as believing we can die. Even our concern for our bodies, which seems only natural and innocent, is a form of belief in death. Beneath envy is a disguised belief that if we could kill the other person and take what he or she has, we would be more alive. (We have many “cute” little sayings we use about envy, such as, “If looks could kill...” or “looking daggers” at someone.) And finally, even the simple desire “to be as you are not” is identified as a form of death. If what we are as God created us is Life, any desire to be otherwise must be a wish for death.

Workbook Lesson 167, in the second paragraph, contains another list of the various forms the thought of death takes in our lives.

In this world, there appears to be a state that is life's opposite. You call it death. Yet we have learned that the idea of death takes many forms. It is the one idea which underlies all feelings that are not supremely happy. It is the alarm to which you give response of any kind that is not perfect joy. All sorrow, loss, anxiety and suffering and pain, even a little sigh of

weariness, a slight discomfort or the merest frown, acknowledge death.
And thus deny you live (Workbook, p. 311; W-pI.167.2).

Any feeling that is less than “supremely happy.” Any response to anything that is “not perfect joy.” “Depression speaks of death” (Text, p. 526; T-27.I.6:11). “Even a little sigh of weariness, a slight discomfort or the merest frown, acknowledge death.” If these are forms of death, then our lives are far more thoroughly dominated by the thought of death than we have ever realized.

Think, for a moment, what your state of mind would be like if you realized that you were truly and unchangeably immortal. Absolutely invulnerable, so that nothing could ever bring you the slightest harm. What if you knew that you would live forever? And not just you; everyone would live forever, and nothing real could ever be threatened. Fear would cease to have any meaning for you. Anxiety would disappear. You would simply live in supreme happiness and perfect joy.

Well, that *is* reality, according to the Course. Life cannot die. “Nothing real can be threatened” (Text, Introduction; T-Int.2:2). Death, if it existed, would certainly be a threat. Therefore, since nothing that is real can be threatened, anything that seems to be threatened by death is not real.

Any slight discomfort, the merest frown, or anything which sees threat and loss as real, is a bow to death, a statement of our belief in its reality. It is our belief in death that is the issue, and not the transient things which seem to be subject to death. The impermanent nature of bodies, in the Course’s thought system, *defines* them as unreal, and points to a problem in the mind. “What seems to die is but the sign of mind asleep” (Workbook, p. 312; W-pI.167.6:7). The problem, as always in the Course’s understanding, is not “out there” but “in here,” in the mind.

Death is the Ego’s Attempt to Prove God Dead

God and life are identical; nothing apart from Him has life. The ego is the wish to create life apart from God (which is impossible). It is the desire to have and to be something separate from God which is alive. In this insane attempt, God is the enemy or competitor. To use the analogy of a king, God sits on the throne; in order to usurp the throne, He must be assassinated.

God is seen as outside, fierce and powerful, eager to keep all power for Himself. Only by His death can He be conquered by His Son (Manual, p. 16; M-5.I.1:8–9).

Ultimately, the ego’s purpose in death is to prove that God is dead, and the ego is king in His place. In death, the opposite of God is shown to be more powerful than God. God, the author of life, has been unable (or so it appears) to halt the onset of death. God’s Will for life has been thwarted. Thus any death, if real, proves that God Himself must be dead.

Here is the Will of Father and of Son defeated finally, and laid to rest beneath the headstone death has placed upon the body of the holy Son of God (Workbook, p. 302; W-pI.163.4:4).

Unholy in defeat, he has become what death would have him be. His epitaph, which death itself has written, gives no name to him, for he has passed to dust. It says but this: "Here lies a witness God is dead." And this it writes again and still again, while all the while its worshippers agree, and kneeling down with foreheads to the ground, they whisper fearfully that it is so (Workbook, p. 302; W-pI.163.5:1–4).

The idea of the death of God, says this Workbook lesson, is preposterous, so much so "that even the insane have difficulty in believing it" (Workbook, p. 303; W-pI.163.7:1). In fact, by exposing the ego's ultimate motivation, the Course is intending for us to see just how preposterous our belief in death is. If all death implies the death of God, Who cannot die, how can death possibly be true? If, every time I felt a twinge of anxiety (or any form of the belief in death), I remembered to ask myself, "Is God dead?" it might have a very profound effect towards dispersing my anxiety. The Holy Spirit wants us to laugh at such insane ideas as death, pain, and the death of God (see Workbook, p. 351; W-pI.190.3,4), and to let them go.

It is no easy thing that the Course is asking of us: to look beyond the evidence of our eyes that seems to validate death and seems to say that either God is dead, doesn't care, or is on vacation. By using the vision of Christ God gives us, however, we *can* do this; we can come to the place where we "hear the call that echoes past each seeming call to death, that sings behind each murderous attack and pleads that love restore the dying world" (Text, p. 602; T-31.I.10:3).

Death is the Ego's Goal for Us

Who we are in reality is the Son of God, the extension of God's own life. Therefore, our true Self is also the ego's competition, and just as the ego wants God dead in order to usurp His place, it wants us dead as well. The ego wishes to destroy reality and to be real in its place, and for the ego to be real, we must die. Death is the ego's goal for us: "...the ego points to darkness and to death" (Text, p. 251; T-14.In.1:5). "To the ego the goal is death" (Text, p. 280; T-15.I.2:8). Because in reality we are the Son of God, and guiltless, the ego fears our reality and tries to destroy it:

...the ego's destructive urge is so intense that nothing short of the crucifixion of God's Son can ultimately satisfy it. It does not know who the Son of God is because it is blind. Yet let it perceive guiltlessness anywhere, and it will try to destroy it because it is afraid (Text, p. 223f; T-13.II.3:3–5).

This is why the ego, in its insane illogic, wants to kill us (Text, p. 224; T-13.II.5:6).

Under the dusty edge of its distorted world the ego would lay the Son of God, slain by its orders, proof in his decay that God Himself is powerless before the ego's might, unable to protect the life that He created against the ego's savage wish to kill (Text, p. 390; T-19.IV(C).8:1).

Our death (if such were possible) would vindicate the ego and prove it more powerful than God, Who creates only life. So the ego wants us dead. The ego believes in our guilt; it wants us to be guilty of sin and deserving of death, because if we are not, the ego does not exist. So it actively and relentlessly seeks our death, which is called “the one end toward which it works”:

The death penalty is the ego's ultimate goal, for it fully believes that you are a criminal, as deserving of death as God knows you are deserving of life. The death penalty never leaves the ego's mind, for that is what it always reserves for you in the end. Wanting to kill you as the final expression of its feeling for you, it lets you live but to await death. It will torment you while you live, but its hatred is not satisfied until you die. For your destruction is the one end toward which it works, and the only end with which it will be satisfied (Text, p. 216f; T-12.VII.13:2–6).

The phrase about tormenting us while we live refers to the many ways we experience the thought of death even during our so-called life here; they are little versions of death. All forms of human pain are the experience of the ego compromising our Life, causing a degree of death, a little death.

The ego is our own thought. If, however, we can realize its true nature, its ugly viciousness and self-destructiveness, we will reject it. Every whiff of death in our lives is the odor of ego. Rather than letting the evidence of our eyes be proof to us of the truth of the ego and separation, we can choose instead to recognize it as *something we do not want*. “It is the recognition that it is a state of mind unwanted that becomes the means whereby the choice is reassessed” (Text, p. 602; T-31.I.11:2).

How can we respond when we smell the scent of death in our lives, something that is happening all the time, as we've seen, in things as seemingly harmless as a slight frown, as well as the more obvious fits of terror?

When anything seems to you to be a source of fear, when any situation strikes you with terror and makes your body tremble and the cold sweat of fear comes over it, remember it is always for one reason; the ego has perceived it as a symbol of fear, a sign of sin and death (Text, p. 390f; T-19.IV(C).11:1).

We can learn to pray like this:

Take this from me and look upon it, judging it for me.

Let me not see it as a sign of sin and death, nor use it for destruction.

Teach me how not to make of it an obstacle to peace, but let You use it for me, to facilitate its coming (Text, p. 391; T-19.IV(C).11:8–10).

Everything the ego would use to validate sin and death can be used by the Holy Spirit to facilitate the coming of peace. The death of a loved one; aging and the awareness of the certain end of our body; a brush with violence or murder; a disabling accident; a serious illness; war, famine, plagues—all of these things can be transformed from signs of sin and death to the means of facilitating the coming of God’s peace to our hearts and to the hearts of those around us, if we ask the Holy Spirit to take them from us, judge them for us, and teach us how *not* to see them as obstacles to peace.

Death is a Self-imposed Punishment

A part of the ego’s strategy in seeking our death is that it attempts to turn us into guilty sinners who deserve to die, and who even actively cooperate in their own punishment. Guilt can thus be seen as an extension of the thought of death.

The laws of sin demand a victim. Who it may be makes little difference. But death must be the cost and must be paid (Text, p. 498; T-25.VIII.3:3–5).

...death is cruel in [the world’s] frightened eyes and takes the form of punishment for sin (Song of Prayer, p. 17; S-3.II.5:1).

The biblical view of death, accepted by most of the “Christian” world, is that it is a punishment for sin. When Adam and Eve got caught after eating the forbidden fruit, God told Adam that because he had sinned, he, taken from the dust, would return to dust. He would die. “The wages of sin is death,” declares the Apostle Paul in Romans 6:23. This is a view of death that the ego actively promotes, since it leads us to accept our own death as justified. It is our belief that death is justified that is the psychological cause behind physical death; we die because we believe we deserve to die.

In our insanity, we have believed in the reality of our sin. We are so guilty over our imagined sin we believe we deserve to die. This is a not-so-subtle attack on the innocence of God’s Son. We believe that God is angry, and that He is a god of vengeance. This is an attack on God’s Love.

Sickness and its ultimate end, death, are the self-imposed punishment for sin. “The ego believes that by punishing itself it will mitigate the punishment of God” (Text, p. 78; T-5.V.5:6).

But if he chooses death himself, his weakness is his strength. Now has he given himself what God would give to him, and thus entirely usurped the throne of his Creator (Manual, p. 16; M-5.I.2:7–8).

In its weird twisting of reason, the ego believes that if I die I have proved God wrong and triumphed over Him. Therefore the ego leads us to choose death for ourselves, both as a

means of mitigating His punishment and as a means for usurping the function of vengeance we have attributed to Him.

This drive to death at the heart of the ego is the hidden motivation behind all of our sicknesses, our failures, and our pain. It explains the unexplainable choices we make for self-destruction, the mad acts by which we sabotage our loving relationships, and provides the true cause of bodily decay and death.

We Die By Choice

Now we are in a position to understand the startling teaching of the Course that every one of us *chooses* to die. “And no one dies without his own consent” (Workbook, p. 274; W-pI.152.1:4). “No one can die unless he chooses death.” (Text, p. 388; T-19.IV(C).1:4).

The primary meaning of these statements is not that we choose the time and circumstances of our death (although that is implied in the general statements of the Course about our choosing all our experiences, see Text, p. ; T-21.II.2), but that we all choose death itself, simply by being here in bodies that must die.

The Course often speaks of our “wish for death” (Text, p. 494; T-25.VII.2:1), calling it the motivation for the world (Text, p. 526; T-27.I.6:3). It says that all sickness is caused by “the wish to die and overcome the Christ” (Song of Prayer, p. 16; S-3.II.1:6).

We see many deaths that do not seem to be a choice on the part of the person dying: death by illness; death in a bomb blast or a plane crash; the death of an infant. How can these be seen as a choice on the part of the persons involved? Isn’t it an awful judgment on a sick person or a child to say that they chose to die? Not really. In fact, *everyone on earth* has made this choice long before they came here. We would not be here otherwise (with the possible exception of some fully enlightened beings who choose to be here only to help the rest of us). Entering this world, where everything dies, *is* a choice for death. It matters not how death comes; when it comes, it comes because of our choice for death. We can choose death as a punishment, or (in vain) as an escape, or simply (as we will see later) in recognition that we have no further need for the functioning of the body. But whenever death comes, it has been chosen.

Let us remember that death is the thought of separation from God. We would not be in the world, in a body, if we had not chosen this. We might go so far as to say that everyone who comes to this world is suicidal. To choose an existence that is separate from God, Who is Life, is to choose death. The body and its dying is just a manifestation in form of this idea which dominates our minds.

This is obviously a choice for death in a negative, or egoic, sense. What, however, of those whose minds have been healed of the ego’s insanity? If “no one can die unless he chooses death,” do those who have attained right-mindedness choose death as well? Yes, but for different reasons. The Song of Prayer speaks of this different sort of choice for death, which is examined in more detail in the closing chapter of this booklet:

Yet there is a kind of seeming death that has a different source. It does not come because of hurtful thoughts and raging anger at the universe. It merely signifies the end has come for usefulness of body functioning. And so it is discarded as a choice, as one lays by a garment now outworn (Song of Prayer, p. 16; S-3.II.1:8–11).

The World as a Symbol for Death

Now, perhaps, we can begin to understand the depth of meaning in the Course's statement that, "The world was made as an attack on God" (Workbook, p. 403; W-pII.3.2:1).

Do you like what you have made?--a world of murder and attack, through which you thread your timid way through constant dangers, alone and frightened, hoping at most that death will wait a little longer before it overtakes you and you disappear. *You made this up*. It is a picture of what you think you are; of how you see yourself. A murderer is frightened, and those who kill fear death. (Text, p. 400; T-20.III.4:2–5).

The world was made to picture what we think we are, and what we think we are is a murderer. Therefore, the world pictures murder and punishment for that murder. It is a place where life survives by murdering other life.

Here we have the fear of God most starkly represented. For in that thought has guilt already raised madness to the throne of God Himself. And now there is no hope. Except to kill. Here is salvation now. An angry father pursues his guilty son. Kill or be killed, for here alone is choice. Beyond this there is none, for what was done cannot be done without. The stain of blood can never be removed, and anyone who bears this stain on him must meet with death (Manual, p. 43; M-17.7:5-13).

This entire world is an outpicturing of death. Where did death come from? God did not create it, the Course affirms (Workbook, p. 303; W-pI.163.8:6). Instead, we made it. Death, and the world that outpictures it, is our invention. This whole world is a manifestation of the same thought of death and punishment with which the separation began. The Course refers to this world as "the one you made out of your split mind, and which is the symbol of death" (Text, p. 207; T-12.III.8:4). It says the world is a "symbol of punishment," governed by the laws of death (Text, p. 220; T-13.Int.2:4).

Given the thought of death within our minds, what else would we expect the world to be? We are projecting our belief in our own guilt, and the world is the prison we believe we deserve; the world is Death Row, where everyone is awaiting execution. We should not be surprised that the world is such a place of death: "You came to die, and what would you expect but to perceive the signs of death you seek?" (Text, p. 574; T-29.VII.5:2) Driven mad by guilt (Text, p. 220; T-13.Int.2:2), the mind has made an illusion of punishment and death, and then has projected itself into that illusion in the form of a

body. *We came here to die.* Death is what we are seeking, so death is what we find. The wish for death is the entire motivation for the existence of the world.

It is not will for life but wish for death that is the motivation for this world. Its only purpose is to prove guilt real (Text, p. 526; T-27.I.6:3,4).

Once again we see the ego's frantic desire to prove the unreal to be real, thus validating its own existence. The ego thinks that if it can put us to death, it has proved that our guilt is real. If our guilt is real, then separation (the "cause" of guilt) must be real as well. And if separation is real, the ego is real; the ego actually exists. So it implants this strange attraction to guilt and death into our minds. It projects a world in which death rules, and sends us here to die. Thus death, the thought of separation, has become the motivating power behind our very existence in this world.

This wish for death is, of course, insane. The Text makes the point that, if we have to die to prove we were "alive" as egos, it is hardly a rewarding method of proof (Text, p. 228; T-13.IV.3:2,3). If we realized what we were doing we would stop it at once. That is exactly the point, the reason why the Course wants us to expose the belief in death that lies behind our seemingly innocent behaviors and attitudes in this world. If we can see through the disguises to the belief in death beneath them, we will let those disguises go.

Chapter Three

How We Can Deal with Death

Let us turn now from the theoretical to the practical. How can all this very high-minded and radical teaching about the nature of death be applied to our lives? We are not expected, of course, to instantly free ourselves of every form the illusion of death has taken in our experience. That comes only at the end of our learning experience. But we are expected to move in that direction, to gradually and constantly prepare ourselves “to leave the world and go beyond its tiny reach” (Manual, p. 35; M-14.4:3–5). Total release from our belief in death is part of our goal. To that end, we need to begin to become conscious of exactly how devoted to death we are. We need to expose our beliefs in death, whatever form they may take, and to see the insanity that lies behind them, so that we will laugh at them and brush them aside, no longer wanted.

The Course’s answer to the thought of death is the same answer it offers to every form of our belief in separation: forgiveness. Our guilt is death’s dynamic energy, the mental habit that seems to make death both justified and inevitable. As we begin to learn, first, that our experiences of death all stem from the thought of death in our minds, and second, that this thought is identical to the thought that we can be separate from God, we can begin to forgive even death itself, and to forgive the world for being a place of death.

The path of forgiveness of death begins if, when we see death in the world, we realize, “I am responsible for what I see” (Text p. 418; T-21.II.2:3). The Course teaches repeatedly that, though we believe that our thoughts and feelings are caused by the world, the reverse is actually the truth. The same principle applies in the case of death. We believe, for instance, that it is the death of a loved one that has caused us to become angry at God. Salvation begins when we see that the opposite is true, that it is our anger at God that has caused a world in which such death seems to happen. Death is the mind’s justification for its wish to be separate from God.

When we encounter some form of death, then, we can learn to see it as a mirror of our belief in death and our wish for separation. We can understand that what we are seeing is an illusion made up by our own minds because a part of our minds wants to see this illusion. We can recognize illusion as illusion, rather than a reality. We can choose, instead, to let what symbolizes our separation serve as a reminder that separation is not what we really want. Instead of allowing death to turn us *from* God, we can let it turn us *to* Him.

How do we forgive death? In the same way we forgive “sin:” by seeing it is only an illusion, a projection of our own thoughts. When we allow the Holy Spirit to undo death’s illusion in our minds, the reality that has been hidden by the illusion, the eternal life of God’s Son, will be revealed of itself.

Facing the Little Forms of Death

We can begin with the less threatening forms of death: the sadness, anxiety, anger, and concern for our bodies; the little sighs of weariness, feelings of discomfort, or anything less than supreme happiness and perfect joy, all of which, as we have seen, the Course identifies as acknowledgments of death.

Learning to respond to these with truth, bringing the illusions to truth, is the gist of Course practice. It is called “response to temptation” in the Workbook (Workbook, p. 164; W-pI.95.5:3). Our first lesson, I think, is in learning to recognize these things as temptation, as a form of belief in death, rather than passing them off as a normal part of “life.” Our growth in practice is measured as our mind becomes “increasingly sensitive to what it would once have regarded as very minor intrusions of discomfort” (Text, p. 18f; T-2.III.4:7).

Instead of regarding these negative thoughts and feelings as inevitable, we begin to recognize them as mental aberrations that are unworthy of God’s Son. We bring them to the Holy Spirit, saying, “This is not a part of what I want” (Workbook, p. 232; W-pI.130.11:5). The Holy Spirit will meet us with gentle forgiveness, and show us another way, a different choice we can make. We bring the darkness; He meets it with Light. He transforms our perceptions, enabling us to see things differently.

Accept No Compromise

Eventually we grow to realize that *all* such thoughts are thoughts of death. We decide to have no part of them, or as the Manual puts it, to “Accept no compromise in which death plays a part” (Manual, p. 64; M-27.7:1). Whenever anything that is not supreme happiness or perfect joy arises in our minds, we respond to it with alacrity.

These instructions from Review VI in the Workbook give the general outline of how we are to deal with each form of belief in death that we notice:

Permit no idle thought to go unchallenged. If you notice one, deny its hold and hasten to assure your mind that this is not what it would have. Then gently let the thought which you denied be given up...(Workbook, p. 376; W-pI.rVI.In.5:2–4).

Jesus urges us to remember his resurrection, and use it to help us overcome our desire for death:

When you are tempted to yield to the desire for death, *remember that I did not die*. You will realize that this is true when you look within and *see me* (Text, p. 217; T-12.VII.15:1,2).

He is asking us to become aware of his living presence within us, for when we see him there, we will know he did not die. The paragraph continues to reason that if he did not die, eternal life must be true for us as well, because God would not give him a gift

without giving it to all of us. Bringing our thoughts of death into that living presence within us is what causes their power to evaporate.

Practice with these “easier” forms of death will strengthen us to face what seems far greater to us, physical death, either of a loved one or our own. In fact, physical death is no greater an obstacle than simple anxiety; they are different forms of the same thing. We can overcome our fear of death and our attraction to it. Indeed, this can happen now, in the holy instant, in the holy relationship:

You who are dedicated to the incorruptible have been given through your acceptance, the power to release from corruption. What better way to teach the first and fundamental principle in a course on miracles than by showing you the one that seems to be the hardest can be accomplished first? (Text, p. 389; T-19.IV(C).6:1,2).

In overcoming a thought of sadness we *are* overcoming the thought of death. The more we practice with these little forms of death, the more we will realize that “the big one” is really the same little one, and nothing to be feared at all.

My brother, child of our Father, this is a *dream* of death. There is no funeral, no dark altars, no grim commandments nor twisted rituals of condemnation to which the body leads you (Text, p. 390; T-19.IV(C).8:2,3).

Death of a Loved One

Death never seems more real than when someone you love deeply dies. A wrenching dislocation occurs in your life, a gaping void suddenly appears where before was sweet comfort and fullness. You suddenly know what it means to have the bottom fall out of your life. No matter how well-schooled you may be in spiritual faith and metaphysical truth, there are few, I think, who can go through such an experience without profound grief and a shredding of the heart.

Often, in such a moment, we seem to face twin temptations. On the one hand lies the temptation to succumb to the grief, to be taken over by it and become it, to accept its message of pointlessness. Abandon your faith in God, give up on love because it always ends in pain. On the other hand lies the temptation to suppress the grief, to judge it as “not OK” for a spiritual person. Neither approach seems to work, nor to make us any happier. Both approaches simply add to the armoring of our hearts. And both, if you look closely, make death quite real: on the one hand to be acknowledged as all powerful, and on the other hand to be shunned as supremely fearful.

There is a way of opening to the grief that *encompasses it*, instead of allowing it to *engulf us*. The grief we feel when a loved one dies can be a doorway to God if we allow it to be that. I think that the intensity of feeling we have in mourning the loss of one dear to us is perhaps the closest we can ever come on this earth to *being aware of our belief in*

separation from God, separation from love itself. And in that awareness lies the opportunity for a healing that penetrates to the core of our pain. Stephen Levine, in his wonderful book, *Who Dies?*, writes:

When we speak of loving someone, what we mean is that that person acts as a mirror for the place within us which is love. That being becomes our contact with ourself. When that mirror is shattered, the grief that we feel is the loss of contact with that place within us which is love. Thinking of that person as other than ourself, we mourn our loss, we reexperience our sense of separateness and isolation that originally motivated us to look outside of ourselves for that essential unity we call love (*Who Dies?* p. 87-88).

In recognizing our grief as reexperiencing our sense of separateness, we can come closer to an awareness of how profound our sense of separateness truly is, and we can bring that sense into the holy place within us, to be healed. In this time of grief our careful armoring is peeled back, and the ever present call for love in our heart is revealed. This is not something to be shunned. This is a precious teacher. Look! How deeply my heart loves! How incessant and undeniable is my longing for union with the Beloved! How exquisitely painful is the thought of separation! How clear is my call for love! In the moment of grief, perhaps more so than at any other moment of our lives, we can most wonderfully know ourselves as the love that we are.

The place of pain is also the place of healing. When the pain of lost love in our minds is so obvious, the need of healing cannot be denied (Text, p. 226; T-13.III.6:5). This is the time in which we need, more than ever, to turn to the Light within us:

Do not hide suffering from His sight, but bring it gladly to Him. Lay before His eternal sanity all your hurt, and let Him heal you. Do not leave any spot of pain hidden from His Light, and search your mind carefully for any thoughts you may fear to uncover. For He will heal every little thought you have kept to hurt you and cleanse it of its littleness, restoring it to the magnitude of God (Text, p. 227; T-13.III.7:3-6).

When a person I love dies, the love we shared does not die. The person's form is gone. That which represented, reflected and symbolized love for me is gone. But the reality of that love, which her personality and her body only symbolized, never dies. It lives within me as part of me. And I have a choice. I can vainly cling to the symbol and mourn its loss as the loss of love itself, or I can choose to recognize that the reality represented by the symbol, the place within me which is love, still exists, and always will. What I saw in my beloved, and what they reflected about me to myself, was this shared Self, the eternal Son of God Who never dies. (For more on the death of loved ones, see the chapter on Questions and Answers, "Do special relationships continue after death?")

A Personal Experience with Grief

Just over one year ago, my dearest friend in all the world, my spiritual partner for fifteen years, Lynne Leinthal, died after a long illness. She had been a part of my life for twenty-two years in all; we were as close as any two human beings could be. I began my study of the Course with Lynne, and learned much of what I now seem to understand in the context of my relationship with her.

What follows is a message I sent out on America On Line and the Internet to my Course friends there, many of whom exchange thoughts about the daily Workbook lessons, when I learned that Lynne was facing death. I share it here with you because, perhaps, it can serve as some kind of example (as poor as it may be) of how a Course student faces the death of someone they love, with both honesty about their feelings and faith in the Course's message. I have left the words unedited, as I wrote them that day.

Today's lesson is, "Let all things be exactly as they are." This morning I was wakened by a phone call carrying the news that my best friend in all the world, Lynne, the person I care most deeply for, lay near death in a hospital. Her heart stopped at 6 AM this morning. The doctors revived her, but she was still comatose.

One might think that it is particularly difficult for me on such a day to hear these words, "Let all things be exactly as they are." Yet I find them oddly comforting. They carry a sense to me that all is well. Nothing is out of place or out of time. Departing the physical body is an inevitable part of this dream, and this particular departure was not unexpected, although it seems premature. Lynne is quite ready to leave her body, which has given her little but pain for the last two years. The most loving thing I can do for her, I think, is to "Let all things be exactly as they are."

If this is the time she chooses to leave, who am I to say, "No, not yet"? I don't want her to leave before I see her again, but is that for my sake or for hers? Do I want her to linger in pain to satisfy my desire? No, of course not.

Every time today I have repeated these words, I have felt a wave of comfort come over me. My eyes cloud with tears—of course they do. An infinite emptiness threatens to suck my heart into its void. I am not so far advanced that I can knowingly communicate with her without physical connection of some kind, at least not most of the time. So I will spend a lot of time feeling "without her," missing her presence in my life. Yet I have learned enough from the Course to know that the apparent separation is illusory. I have some confidence that our loving thoughts, which we have shared, will never die. I do believe that "Nothing real can be threatened." So I know that, if she chooses now to leave her body, nothing real will be lost. "Let all things be exactly as they are" means to me the confidence that only truth is true, and that there is no death. It means that "There

is nothing to fear.” It means that nothing is wrong, whatever my senses try to tell me.

“Let all things be exactly as they are.” What gain is there to me in resisting what is so? What can it bring but pain—pain to myself, pain to others, and perhaps even pain to Lynne as she senses my resistance to her chosen moment? To resist what is so would be to make her guilty about leaving if she chose to do so. And I don’t want to do that to my dearest friend.

To let all things be exactly as they are is to stop trying to control the world, to stop trying to dictate to the universe how it must behave in order to make me comfortable with it. It is to stop trying to play God, which is what our egos have been doing for eons. I do not know what is in my own best interest; how can I possibly know what is in the best interest of Lynne?

“Let all things be exactly as they are.” The words come like a blanket on my chilly thoughts, like oil on the troubled waters, soothing and quieting my agitation. There is a warmth of love in them. They are not fatalistic words, but words of faith. I am so very grateful for this lesson today.

Our Own Death

If death is only the illusion of an end, and nothing really happens in death, then obviously death is not to be feared. The attitude of a healed mind towards the death of the body, then, would be akin to indifference. The body, never really alive, would be seen as insignificant (Manual, p. 17; M-5.II.3:12), “valueless and hardly worth the least defense” (Workbook, p. 246; W-pI.135.8:2). The only concern for the body’s continuation would be in regard to its usefulness in communicating forgiveness and bringing healing to the world. A mind completely free of the fear of death would be a mind living in the real world.

Very few have attained this lofty state. Most of us, far from being free of the fear of death, are dominated by it, but largely unaware of it. We have buried death in layers of denial. It surfaces in such disguised forms as worry, sadness, concerns for bodies, and free-floating anxiety. In general, the work the Course takes us through is, first, seeing past these surface forms and unearthing the hidden beliefs of the ego, and only then, letting them go. In regard to death, the same two steps apply. Therefore, for most of us, the bulk of our mental work will consist of bringing to light our hidden beliefs in death and fear of death. If we have not already done this work, to *try* to live without fear of death hinders rather than helps. It results in hypocrisy, denial and projection. When some shreds of our fears about death do rise to our awareness, we guiltily repress them, pretend they were not there, and try to act fearless. As a result, the hidden beliefs in death never get unveiled, and never get brought to the Holy Spirit for healing.

It can be helpful to confront our denial of death quite directly. Reading books about death and dying can be very helpful, for instance, Stephen Levine’s *Who Dies?* and *Healing*

Into Life and Death. Several years ago I attended a weekend workshop with Stephen and his wife, Ondrea. When some friends asked what the topic was, they were bewildered when I told them, “Death and dying.” “Why would anyone want to spend a whole weekend discussing death?” they asked.

The tone of the workshop was that preparing to die was a powerful tool in learning to live whole-heartedly. At least half the people attending were terminally ill with cancer or AIDS. One after another, people stood and told how, when suddenly confronted with the likelihood of *immanent* death, the priorities of their lives were sharply readjusted. To paraphrase one participant, “When you know that you are going to die soon, love suddenly becomes a lot more important than all the other bullshit.”

Facing the reality of the certainty of our own physical death, and doing so now rather than at the last minute, can be an extremely healing experience. Stephen Levine puts it like this:

When we recognize that...our body is already broken, that indeed we are already dead, then life becomes precious and we open to it just as it is, in the moment it is occurring. When we understand that all our loved ones are already dead—our children, our mates, our friends—how precious they become. How little fear can interpose, how little doubt can estrange us. When you live your life as though you’re already dead, life takes on new meaning. Each moment becomes a whole lifetime, a universe unto itself.

...If our only spiritual practice were to live as though we were already dead, relating to all we meet, to all we do, as though it were our final moments in the world, what time would there be for old games or falsehoods or posturing?...Only love would be appropriate, only the truth (*Who Dies?* p. 99).

One powerful way to heal our fear of death is to work with the dying (which is what the Levines have been doing for many years, as has Dr. Gerald Jamposky of Attitudinal Healing fame). This does not have to be done in a formal way, as part of an organization. Nearly all of us have friends or family facing the prospect of death, either personally or in the death of a loved one. Simply being open to the experience, refusing to unconsciously avoid contact with the sick and dying, can bring healing to our own lives as we confront, as in a mirror, our own fears of death. Only when we see these fears clearly, admit their existence, and expose them to the Light, can they begin to be healed.

Helping a Friend in Grief or Near Death

If we do take on the task of comforting the dying, or helping a friend in grief, what can we do? What can we say, as Course students? Should we “preach the gospel” of ACIM, proclaiming loudly that “there is no death” or “death is an illusion?” I think not. Preaching isn’t held in high regard by the Course:

Your holiness is the salvation of the world. It lets you teach the world that it is one with you, not by preaching to it, not by telling it anything, but merely by your quiet recognition that in your holiness are all things blessed along with you (Workbook, p. 56; W-pI.37.3:1,2).

The way we best help others facing death or grief is through the healing of our own minds. If we are at peace in their presence, it “teaches” them that death can be faced peacefully. We act as reminders of another way of thinking and being. If we are not at peace, then honestly confronting our fears, and perhaps sharing our process with the person we are helping, may help them accept their own fears and may show them a way of dealing with them.

We help our friend by working within ourselves. We remind ourselves that what appears to be death is just the illusory projection of our own belief in separation. We open ourselves to allowing that which seems to cause fear to be transformed into something that merely mirrors a thought of fear in our minds, and we take responsibility for that thought of fear. We turn to the Holy Spirit within, giving Him permission to heal us. We recognize in our own fear the call for love it conceals. We see in our own denial of life the underlying belief in life that fear conceals. And we affirm it, we acknowledge the life and love that cannot die.

The last thing a person in grief, or in fear of dying, needs is for someone to tell them that their grief or fear is “wrong.” Attempts at correcting the person will only layer guilt upon guilt. “It is not up to you to change your brother, but merely to accept him as he is” (Text, p. 156; T-9.III.6:4). Demonstrate to the other person that their grief, or their fear, or their impending death, do not diminish your love and your acceptance; this is perhaps the most healing thing you can do.

How will this look in form? Very normal. It can look like almost anything. To speak the words “I’m sorry for your loss” at a funeral is not hypocritical for a Course student, even one sufficiently advanced to be quite certain that nothing can be lost. Not if those words are the most palatable form of love the grieving person can accept. The love, the kindness, the true empathy will take the shape most suited to the recipient, and not be distorted into forms appropriate to the “truth” but empty of anything that can reach the hearts of those who need it most.

Chapter Four

Questions Concerning Death

In this chapter I will try to answer some common questions about death that have been only partly answered, or not addressed at all, in the main body of the booklet. I do not consider my answers to be definitive or final. I am merely doing my best to give you my own opinion, based on my understanding of *A Course in Miracles*. When my answer is primarily my own opinion, or is based on other sources than the Course, I will make that plain.

I want to thank the participants in the Internet “acim” mailing list discussion group who contributed many of these questions. I regret that space does not allow including all of your questions.

What Happens When We Die?

The Course does not try to give us much information about what happens when we die, as do some spiritual teachings. It seems to be telling us that death does not change anything, since death is nothing more than an illusion. The body, never alive, does not die. Nothing dies. If death does not exist, it can't have much effect. In fact it can't have *any* effects; having effects would make it real.

Although the Course does not say anything about what happens after death, it does have something to say about what *does not* happen. Two common notions about death are that to die means to leave this world, thus escaping from our problems, and that after death we enter a place of rest. The phrase, “Rest in peace,” is so closely associated with death that to say the words implies someone has died. The Course takes the time to negate both of these common notions about death.

There is a risk of thinking death is peace, because the world equates the body with the Self which God created. Yet a thing can never be its opposite. And death is opposite to peace, because it is the opposite of life. And life is peace (Text, p. 541; T-27.VII.10:2-5).

The death of the body, then, does not bring peace. If life is peace, reasons the Course, how could death bring peace? It simply cannot be. And life is not in the body; it is in the mind.

What happens to the body, then, makes no real difference. What makes a difference is what happens to, or within, the mind. If the mind is at peace when the body ceases to exist, that mind will be at peace after the body ceases to exist. If a mind is in conflict before death of the body, it will still be in conflict after death. Death is not a way out. Mind continues, and only in mind can the conflict be ended.

Another passage clearly counteracts the idea of death as leaving the world, or an escape from life's problems:

You see in death escape from what you made. But this you do not see; that you made death, and it is but illusion of an end. Death cannot be escape, because it is not life in which the problem lies (Manual, p. 49; M-20.5:2-4).

The idea here is much the same. Death is an illusion of the opposite of life. It seems to offer a way out of an unhappy life, but "it is not life in which the problem lies." Death is not the way out of the problem; it *is* the problem.

The world is not left by death but by truth (Text, p. 46; T-3.VII.6:11).

We do not "leave the world" when we die. We carry the world with us, because there is no world outside of our mind.

Within itself it [the mind] has no limits, and there is nothing outside it. It encompasses everything. It encompasses you entirely; you within it and it within you. There is nothing else, anywhere or ever (Text, p. 360; T-18.VI.8:8-11).

We can only speculate about what the mind does when it lets the body go, taking the world with it inside itself. Perhaps we exist in some non-physical state for a while and then take on new bodies, here or in some other place in the illusory universe. The specifics are unimportant. What is clear from the Course is that life continues, and the misperceptions of the mind continue to result in pain until they are given up.

The idea of death gave birth to the world; how could death possibly assist us in leaving it? We came here to die. So the only way to leave this world is not to die, but to have the idea of death replaced in our minds by the thought of life, that is, by truth.

When your body and your ego and your dreams are gone, you will know that you will last forever. Perhaps you think this is accomplished through death, but nothing is accomplished through death, because death is nothing. Everything is accomplished through life, and life is of the mind and in the mind (Text, p. 96; T-6.V(A).1:1-3).

Thus, the Course's answer to the question, "What happens when we die?" is, quite simply, "nothing." The mind's basic condition, which is the only reality worth our concern, is not changed by death. Death is only the illusion of an end, and what seems to end (physical life) is likewise only an illusion. Life is of the mind; the mind is changed only through life. Changing our minds, then, should be where we focus our attention.

In the Course, the body is said to be “a wholly neutral thing” (Workbook Lesson 294). Since the body is neutral, death must also be neutral. The ego tries to use it to distance us from God and to further separate us. The Holy Spirit can use death as a positive expression of liberation. The right-minded experience of death is discussed elsewhere in this booklet (“Gentle Death”).

What happens after we die?

I have already mentioned that the Course teaches that death does not really change anything, and therefore, if our mind is unawakened before the body dies, it will still be unawakened afterward. The illusions of the mind continue. The one essential understanding about death, according to the Course, is that “birth was not the beginning, and death is not the end” (Manual, p. 58; M-24.5:7). Life itself is eternal; there is no other kind of life.

What form those illusions will take is not defined by the Course itself. There are a few hints, but only hints. For instance, the line, “All thinking produces form at some level” (Text, p. 27; T-2.VI.9:14), implies the existence of levels within the illusion of form. There may be different planes of existence, as many metaphysical teachers have stated. We may have illusory bodies of a different type. The point is, however, that these levels are all parts of the illusion, and all involve exactly the same kinds of lessons we are learning right now. If we are still dreaming when our body dies, we will continue in the dream, in some form, after death, in an environment which, like this world, is made out of our thoughts.

The overall tone of the Course is certainly not supportive of the traditional Christian understanding that, upon death, we immediately go either to Heaven or to hell, complete reward or complete punishment. Either one would be a dramatic change for most of us, and death changes nothing.

Does our individual consciousness continue?

Again, we can only draw implications from the Course. The basic fact that death does not change anything would indicate that individual consciousness does continue. This seems to be borne out by the fact that Jesus still speaks, in the Course, as Jesus, and that other advanced teachers of God are referred to as distinct individuals even though they have left their bodies (Manual, p. 61; M-26.2).

Do accounts of near-death experiences indicate more of what happens after death?

In my personal opinion, I think they do. I also think that such experiences are also not completely trustworthy, since they are, after all, merely another form of perception, which is not knowledge. The experiences people have are therefore, to some degree, colored by what they expect to see and what they want to see. They can be very useful in confirming the continuing nature of life itself. The details, however, may be less reliable.

Do we reincarnate?

The Course dedicates a short chapter in the Manual to this topic, and there it gives its definitive answer. In the ultimate sense reincarnation is not true because incarnation (coming to live in a body) is not true. If it isn't true once, how could it have any meaning many times? (Manual, p. 57; M-24.1:1,2) Once or many times, it is still all a dream.

Within our experience of the illusion, however, the Course does seem to favor the concept of reincarnation. The Course talks of our returning again and again until we learn the lesson that the world does not exist (Workbook, p. 237; W-p1.132.6.2-5). It speaks of life as a recurring cycle: "Such is each life; a seeming interval from birth to death and on to life again" (Text, p. 513; T-26.V.13:3). Such statements seem to support, or at the very least, to be consistent with, a belief in reincarnation. And in *Absence From Felicity*, Jesus did not contradict Helen's and Bill's belief in reincarnation in his personal messages to them. Helen often told Kenneth Wapnick that Jesus had assured her that the "next time you come would be different" (*Absence from Felicity*, p. 500).

Yet when the Course discusses reincarnation directly, the main thrust of the discussion is that reincarnation should not be treated as a formal part of the Course curriculum. It specifically states that belief in reincarnation is not necessary (Manual, p. 57; M-24.2:5, 6) and should not be made an issue of by Course teachers (Manual, p. 57; M-24.4:3,4). It implies that some may even be attracted to the Course because it "advocates a long-held belief" of their own in reincarnation, but that this is not a desirable motive for studying the Course (Manual, p. 57; M-24.3:6).

A belief in reincarnation can be useful or harmful depending on what purpose is given to it:

Our only question should be, "Is the concept helpful?" And that depends, of course, on what it is used for. If it is used to strengthen the recognition of the eternal nature of life, it is helpful indeed. Is any other question about it really useful in lighting up the way? Like many other beliefs, it can be bitterly misused. At least, such misuse offers preoccupation and perhaps pride in the past. At worst, it induces inertia in the present. In between, many kinds of folly are possible (Manual, p. 57; M-24.1:4-11).

The idea of reincarnation, then, is not inherently transformative. It can be used by the ego to delay us. Although reincarnation can serve us as a useful mental construct within the illusion of physical life, it is too solidly based on that illusion to be free from misuse.

Is suicide ever a valid choice?

The Course does not speak directly for or against suicide. The desire to take one's life is clearly motivated by the ego's desire for our death, and our belief that the ego's voice is the only voice:

Even when it [the ego] attacks so savagely that it tries to take the life of someone who thinks its is the only voice, it speaks of hell even to him. For it tells him hell is here as well, and bids him leap from hell into oblivion (Text, p. 281; T-15.I.5:2-3).

Given the Course's statement that death does not really change anything, I think we could easily make a case that suicide is pointless. Most people who attempt suicide out of despair do so in an effort to escape from unbearable mental anguish. It seems to stem from seeing the horror of our own ego without the hope of deliverance: "You think if what is true about you were revealed to you, you would be struck with horror so intense that you would rush to death by your own hand, living on after seeing this being impossible" (Workbook, p. 159; W-pI.93.1:3).

Death is not an escape. The thrust of the Course's teaching would indicate that "Death cannot be escape, because it is not life in which the problem lies" (Manual, p. 49; M-20.5:4). Therefore, whatever the mental confusion of those who take their own lives, it will eventually have to be resolved. It cannot be run away from. Yet, although suicide is a futile act, no one who understands the Course can condemn suicide as some kind of "mortal sin," since the Course teaches that there is no sin, and nothing separates us from God even for an instant.

A person who takes his own life has not thrown away his chances. Life continues. Therefore, ultimately, he or she will be healed and brought home, with all the rest of us. In fact, one allusion to suicide made by the Course can be seen as casting a ray of hope about those who commit or attempt suicide. The Course says that all of us, to attain salvation, must reach the point at which we despair of ever finding salvation in this world. It then adds:

Men have died [seemingly implying suicide] on seeing this, because they saw no way except the pathways offered by the world. And learning they led nowhere, lost their hope. And yet this was the time they could have learned their greatest lesson. All must reach this point, and go beyond it (T-31.IV.3:4-7).

In other words, a person who attempts suicide has reached a point of total despair about their life in this world. This point is one *all of us must reach* at some point on our journey. To find our way to Heaven, we must have reached the point of abandoning all hope in the world, so that we can "go beyond it" to find our hope in God. The mental state that sometimes leads to suicide, then, is actually a landmark on the journey home. It indicates the person has indeed made a great deal of progress on that journey. They were on the verge of learning their "greatest lesson." We may rest assured that, in their continuing life (whatever the form), they will eventually be able to go beyond this point

of despair to learn that lesson and find their true salvation.

How can I help someone who is terminally ill?

The greatest help of all is to be healed within our own minds of our own belief in death. The mere presence of someone who no longer believes in death's reality can have an incredibly soothing effect, even if no words are ever spoken directly about the subject. This may be beyond our current capacity, but still, our aim should be to be as free of belief in death's reality as we know how to be.

Facing the end of physical "life" can be very beneficial; as we have observed already, it can be beneficial to us to do so as early as possible in life, a part of the process of learning not to unduly value what is ultimately valueless. A person's values may come up for serious reconsideration when actual physical death is visibly approaching. The issue of death is being forced into awareness. We, as helpers, should be alert to assist a person in this re-evaluation of themselves, if this is something they want to do. On the other hand, we should not expect too much. Some people will simply not be open to this, and will need simple comfort more than psychological probing. Their unwillingness to confront themselves need not concern us too deeply, if we are aware that death is not the end.

If death is not the end, as the Course teaches, then this is something we should be trying to communicate. If we give the dying person the impression that they have very little time left so they had better clean up their act and complete all unfinished business right away, we are teaching them that death is the end.

As I pointed out earlier, if we are distressed by the person's impending death, we should not try to hide that fact. We can share our own spiritual process with them, if they seem willing to hear it. Sometimes our own honesty about our fears will assist the person in admitting their own fear, and give us an opportunity to offer some comfort. Simply hearing someone else admit, "I am afraid, too," will help them feel less alone. Simply holding their hand, touching them in loving ways, or ministering to their physical needs can communicate love. At this point, as always in reality, nothing but love matters.

Do our special relationships continue after death?

Yes, I believe they do. The story of Helen Schucman and Bill Thetford seems to have continued throughout many lifetimes, in many different roles, for instance (see *Absence From Felicity*). The Course teaches that, "It is the destiny of all relationships to become holy" (Manual, p. 7; M-3.4:6), and, in the same sentence, it says that "all who meet will someday meet again." It tells us that what appears to be the end of a relationship is not a real end at all, and that some day, every relationship will become holy. It is obvious to all of us that this does not happen within our single lifetime. It must mean, therefore, that the relationships will continue somehow, on another plane or in another lifetime.

Can we communicate with the dead?

Yes. The Course clearly teaches that the body is not necessary for communication

because communication is of the mind.

The Prince of Peace was born to re-establish the condition of love by teaching that communication remains unbroken even if the body is destroyed, provided that you see not the body as the necessary means of communication...communication, which must be of the mind, cannot be sacrificed (Text, p. 305; T-15.XI.7:2,3).

Communication is not limited to the small range of channels the world recognizes (Manual, p. 59; M-25.2:2)

The body actually limits communication, rather than facilitating it. We are taught to use the body only as a communication device, but this is necessary only because we think we are bodies. Minds are what communicate, and minds do not end when the body does. It can be a very useful practice, in my opinion, to converse mind to mind with those whose bodies are no longer with us. We can complete unfinished business in this way, and communicate love and forgiveness which, perhaps, we failed to communicate while their body was with us. In fact, consciously communicating mind to mind, even while a person is still physically in this world, is quite possible and quite helpful in some circumstances. I have done this with a very close friend when we were physically separated, and I have seen evidence that my thoughts “got through.” Not the words themselves, but the sense of them.

In the section on psychic powers in the Manual (Chapter 25), the Course says that all such abilities are natural to everyone, and their awakening is merely part of removing fear and our beliefs in the limits imposed by our egos. Such powers can be used for good. They are “strengths which the Holy Spirit wants and needs” (Manual, p. 59f; M-25.4:6). The section warns, however, that such psychic abilities can also be misused, and that there is “a particular appeal in unusual abilities that can be curiously tempting” (Manual, p. 59; M-25.4:5). Therefore, I think, we need to exercise special caution in venturing into these areas, and be very sure that we are giving any ability such as communicating with the dead to Him, for His purposes and not for our own.

Communications from the dead, especially verbal ones, are doubly suspect in my mind; I emphasize that this is purely my own opinion. But I base my remarks once again on the idea that death does not really change anything. If a person’s mind was confused before death it will be confused after death, perhaps even more so; the messages we receive are not necessarily coming from enlightened beings. Furthermore, there is a great temptation in ourselves to hear what we want to hear. Therefore I believe that such communications should be treated in about the same way we treat advice from a “living” friend, and tested against many other standards before being accepted as “gospel truth.”

Is physical immortality taught by the Course?

No, in my opinion (there have been some students of the Course who have believed otherwise). The Course clearly states that there is no death, but this does not mean that

the body can, therefore, live forever. As we have seen, the Course, to the contrary, teaches that the body is not alive at all; it was made to die, and it *will* die until we change its purpose.

Nothing survives its purpose. If it be conceived to die, then die it must until it does not take this purpose as its own (Text, p. 572; T-29.VI.3;1,2).

“The body is the symbol of the ego, as the ego is the symbol of separation” (Text, p. 300; T-15.IX.2:3). Why would we even want to retain a symbol of the ego, when we have once discerned that is what the body is? “As you let the Holy Spirit teach you how to use the body only for purposes of communication, and renounce its use for separation and attack which the ego sees in it, you will learn you have no need of a body at all” (Text, p. 301; T-15.IX.7:2). “Who would want to keep it [the body] when its usefulness is done?” (Workbook, p. 246; W-pI.135.8:2-3).

An advanced teacher of God, it seems, remains in the body only because of its use as a communication device to those who still think they are bodies. When his work is done, he simply lays the body down because it is no longer needed. So the body is not immortal; it is simply a temporary tool. On the other hand, when our minds have been given over completely to fulfilling the function assigned to us by God (which is basically forgiveness), the Course teaches that the body will begin to “function flawlessly” (Workbook, p. 247; W-pI.135.13.4, see also two previous sentences). As we begin to use the body for the purposes given to it by the Holy Spirit, and only for that,

...the strength the body has will always be enough to serve all truly useful purposes. The body's health is fully guaranteed, because it is not limited by time, by weather or fatigue, by food and drink, or any laws you made it serve before (Workbook, p. 252f; W-pI.136.18.2-3).

Aligning ourselves with the purpose of the Holy Spirit not only brings our body to perfect health, but takes it beyond the limitations of aging, sleep, and even food and drink. Clearly this is an exalted state, one which might be understood as a kind of immortality. In fact, the Course states that dedicating ourselves entirely to the purpose of the Holy Spirit will “keep the body incorruptible and perfect as long as it is useful for your holy purpose” (Text, p. 389; T-19.IV(C).5:1). In this sense, then, we could say that the bodies of advanced teachers of God are immortal until their work is done. Yet equally clearly this is not something to be sought after for its own sake, or perceived as a goal in itself; it is merely a side-effect of the mind's total alignment with its holy function as a savior of the world, and useful only for the purpose which it serves.

Does healing mean preventing the body from dying?

Clearly not, if even the most advanced teachers of God are portrayed in the Course as willingly and gladly laying their bodies aside when their work is done. The healed mind sees that it has no need of a body at all, but it accepts the limitation of the body gladly to

pursue its healing function in the world.

Perhaps a more pressing form of this question is, "If a person's mind is truly healed, does this mean that their sickness will disappear?" The evidence of my own experience says, no. I think, perhaps, if the mind were totally healed of every form of unforgiveness, the body would likewise be healed completely. Most, if not all, of the mental healings we witness or experience are partial, not total.

My very dear friend, who I wrote about earlier, was suffering from a debilitating illness, and did enormous forgiveness work. A relationship, long filled with bitterness, hatred, and biting attack, was totally transformed; I saw with my own eyes an ancient hatred that became a present love (Text, p. 522; T-26.IX.6:1). There was no question in anyone's mind that a miracle had occurred. And yet her body continued to deteriorate, and shortly afterward, she died.

I can find, in my mind, only two possible explanations for this. One is that her mind was not one hundred percent healed. In that one particular area, there was great healing, but other areas of unforgiveness were left untouched. The second explanation is that her body served perfectly well for the purpose of healing for which she came, and when that was finished, she left. Perhaps it is a combination of the two.

Whatever the case, the healing of the body, and preventing physical death, is not to be the aim of our healing work, either in ourselves or in others. Healing is of the mind, and only of the mind.

When the ego tempts you to sickness do not ask the Holy Spirit to heal the body, for this would merely be to accept the ego's belief that the body is the proper aim of healing. Ask, rather, that the Holy Spirit teach you the right perception of the body... (Text, p. 146; T-8.IX.1:5,6).

Chapter Five

Gentle Death

It seems appropriate to end this booklet with a look at what dying can be like when right-mindedness has been attained. The *Song of Prayer* speaks of it most beautifully. I have already quoted from part of this passage, which occurs in Chapter 3, Section II, paragraphs 1 to 4. (References in the form of “2:3” refer to this section, giving paragraph and sentence only.)

A mind truly at peace within itself has no more raging anger at the universe. In our abnormal, ego-dominated condition, death is the self-punishment resulting from the projection of our own anger. What happens when that anger is gone? In such a case, the “seeming death” of the body “has a different source” (1:8). It is a deliberate choice, simply setting aside something that is no longer needed.

There are several references to the idea that the healed mind simply “lays the body aside” when it is time to do so. This must be an important idea for us to get about death, since the Course repeats it so often.

Forgiveness lets the body be perceived as what it is; a simple teaching aid, to be laid by when learning is complete, but hardly changing him who learns at all (Workbook, p. 355; W-pI.192.4:3).

To a mind healed by forgiveness, laying aside the body is experienced as something that *hardly changes* us at all.

In the *Manual for Teachers* (Manual, p. 31; M-12.5:4–12) we are told that when the body is used to “bring the Word of God to those who have it not” it becomes holy and no longer can be sick or die. Instead of dying, it is simply “laid by” “when its usefulness is done.” The mind, in conjunction with the Holy Spirit, decides when this is done. And the teacher of God “does not suffer either in going or remaining.” The latter statement is remarkable because it shows that to an advanced teacher of God, whether or not he is in the body is almost a matter of indifference. Remaining in the body is fine, if that is what is needed to fulfill his role; laying it aside is equally fine, if the work is done.

The clear implication of the Course is that this sort of death is not caused by age, sickness or injury; it is simply the choice of the mind. In Lesson 294, “My body is a wholly neutral thing,” we are told:

Its neutrality protects it while it has a use. And afterwards, without a purpose, it is laid aside. It is not sick nor old nor hurt. It is but functionless, unneeded and cast off. Let me not see it more than this today; of service for a while and fit to serve, to keep its usefulness while it can serve, and then to be replaced for greater good (Workbook, p. 435; W-pII.294.1:6–10).

As we progress in our spiritual journey, we have this sort of “death” to look forward to. It is so different from what we normally associate with the word “death” that the author almost apologizes for using such a word for it: “We call it death, but it is liberty” (3:1).

Here, apparently, in the death of an advanced teacher of God, setting aside the body *is* a liberation of sorts, although we have seen previously that the Course teaches that death doesn’t really change anything. For a mind already at peace within itself, however, leaving the body is a release from limitations. We will expand on this thought in a moment.

This is what death should be; a quiet choice, made joyfully and with a sense of peace, because the body has been kindly used to help the Son of God along the way he goes to God (2:1).

When the Course’s understanding of death has become our own understanding, fully and completely, laying down the body will be a quiet and joyful choice, made without any fear, but in a deep sense of peace. How could we be afraid simply to let go of something that is not even truly a part of ourselves, an illusory shell of form, taken temporarily simply to help the Son of God along the way to God?

Yet for that quiet, joyful peace to be ours, that is how we must see the body. Only when our body has become nothing to us but a useful tool towards salvation, only when we have no other interest vested in it, can we lay it down in such deliberate, quiet calm. “*If there has been true healing*, this can be the form in which death comes when it is time to rest a while from labor gladly done and gladly ended” (3:3, my italics). This is the death of the body as a healed mind sees it. Death can only be faced this way after our minds have been healed, and our forgiveness given to all the world: “Yet first true healing must have come to bless the mind with loving pardon for the sins it dreamed about and laid upon the world” (4:2).

What, then, is the best preparation for death? Is it any surprise that the Course’s answer is, “forgiveness”? Forgiveness is the Course’s answer to everything. Our fear and anxiety about death come, at the root, only from our own guilt. We lift our own guilt by lifting it from others, where we have projected it. Therefore, freedom from fear concerning our own death comes only through forgiving those around us “for the sins [we] dreamed about and laid upon the world” (4:2).

We have said earlier that nothing really changes at death. In this passage, however, there do seem to be some changes indicated when the healed mind lays down its body at the end of its usefulness. When our mind has already been healed, then leaving the body behind *does* make a difference. We are freed from the limitations of the world (2:3); we behold Christ “without blinders” (2:4) because we have learned to look upon the light without fear. In the body we behold him “in hidden forms” and “at most in lovely flashes.” As the Apostle Paul put it in I Corinthians 13, “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”

This kind of complete lifting of the veil cannot happen unless our mind has been healed, freed of the clouds of guilt, and emptied of its fear of the light. Yet we can all experience death more peacefully, the more completely we have forgiven, and have identified with love rather than with the body. There are countless stories of saints in all religious traditions who have died peacefully, joyfully, and with no regrets. Death's sharpest pain seems to come from "unfinished business," guilt and grievances that have not been dealt with, and love left unexpressed.

Let us, then, dedicate ourselves to finishing such business now, while we can. Then, when we are ready, we will be thankful to leave our body behind. Death will be a release from limitations, gently welcomed (3:2). It will be a "gentle passage to a higher prayer, a kind forgiveness of the ways of earth" (4:1), and we will receive it only with thanksgiving. As the healed mind greets the body's death:

Now are its dreams dispelled in quiet rest. Now its forgiveness comes to heal the world and it is ready to depart in peace, the journey over and the lessons learned (4:3–4).