



## From False Guiltlessness to True Guiltlessness

### A Commentary on Helen's Concept of "Healthy Guilt Feelings"

by Greg Mackie

In our Complete and Annotated Edition of *A Course in Miracles* (CE), there is a curious line that was originally Jesus' appraisal of a concept of Helen's: "The concept of healthy guilt feelings has great merit" (T-5.V.6:1). For Course students accustomed to the teaching that "God's Son is guiltless" (T-13.I.15:6) and that "guilt is *always* totally insane and *has* no reason" (T-13.XI.6:3), this can come as a real shock. Given the Course's emphatic anti-guilt stance, how can Jesus affirm the idea that guilt feelings can be *healthy*?

As we look more closely at what he's saying, though—especially as we explore the passage from which this line is taken—we can see that this is actually part of a profound teaching on guilt. It turns out that in the Course's teaching, there is a continuum of sorts that runs from a false, ego-based form of "guiltlessness" all the way to the true guiltlessness that the Course regards as salvation. Learning more about this continuum can help us clarify the Course's teachings on guilt and give us a very practical approach to our own feelings of guilt. That's what I'd like to explore in this article.

#### What does the Course mean when it says we are guiltless?

At first glance, this may sound like a silly question: "Duh, it means that, well, you know, we're *guiltless*." Indeed it does, but we have to be careful in how we interpret this, because we can get into trouble if we aren't clear about what exactly is meant. More specifically, to understand what it means to be guiltless, we have to distinguish between two senses of the word "guilt": the *state* of guilt and the *feeling* of guilt (which in this article I'll also call "feelings of guilt" and "guilt feelings").

This distinction is clear when we look at dictionary definitions of guilt. In my dictionary, the first definition is this: "the fact of having committed a specified or implied offense or crime: *it is the duty of the prosecution to prove the prisoner's guilt*." This is what I'm calling the *state* of guilt: the fact that you really and truly committed an offense of some sort—what a court means when it renders a verdict of "guilty." The second definition is this: "a feeling of having done wrong or failed in an obligation: *he remembered with sudden guilt the letter from his mother that he had not yet read*." This, of course, is what I'm calling the *feeling* of guilt: the feeling that comes as a result of thinking that you've committed an offense of some sort—whether you've actually done so or not. To succinctly summarize the relationship between the two meanings: If you think you're in the *state* of guilt, you'll experience the *feeling* of guilt.

With these two definitions in mind, we can understand more clearly what the Course means when it says we are guiltless: Quite simply, it means that we are never truly in the *state* of guilt. Because the world is an illusion, it is never a fact that we've really and truly committed an offense or crime of any kind. Yes, on an earthly level we've thought, said, and done many loveless things and that needs to be squarely addressed (as we'll see), but the fact is that what looks like a real offense or crime is only an illusion with no effect on ultimate reality. We are incapable of doing *real* harm, so we are forever innocent.

However, the fact that we are never in the state of guilt doesn't mean that we can't have the *feeling* of guilt. We certainly can, because of a twist that I mentioned above: The feeling of guilt comes when you *think* you've committed a real offense or crime, whether you've *actually* done so or not. We all understand this, don't we? Both in actual day-to-day life and in the fictional stories we tell, we're all familiar with the idea of feeling guilty because you think you've done something terrible, even though it may ultimately turn out that you really haven't.

According to the Course, this is our actual situation right now: Though we can never be in the state of guilt, we think we are, and so we are engulfed in a veritable inferno of (mostly unconscious) feelings of guilt. Deep down, we think that we've done something horribly wrong, that we've utterly failed in our obligations to God and our brothers. We think we've done real harm indeed, truly grievous harm of cosmic proportions. As a result, we are wracked with such an

intense feeling of guilt that if it were brought to the surface, we would be “struck with horror so intense that [we] would rush to death by [our] own hand, living on after seeing this being impossible” (W-93.1:3).

The Course’s goal is to convince us that this picture is not true: We are not in the *state* of guilt, so we need no longer have the *feeling* of guilt. But to convince us of this, the Course has to get us in touch with the miserable feelings of guilt that we unconsciously carry. This will both give us an incentive to stop engaging in the loveless thoughts and behaviors that feed those feelings, and enable us to face and undo the belief that keeps those feelings in place: our false belief that those loveless thoughts and behaviors have actually put us in the state of guilt. And this brings us to the continuum I mentioned above.

## **The continuum from false guiltlessness to true guiltlessness**

This is a continuum suggested by that passage about Helen’s concept of healthy guilt feelings (which I will draw from as we go). As this continuum proceeds, we gradually engage less and less in denial, and experience greater and greater mental health. It takes us from a false sense of guiltlessness all the way to the true guiltlessness that is the goal of the Course. Let’s now take a tour of the continuum, from the lowest point to the highest.

### *1. False guiltlessness: denying our feelings of guilt while engaging in the unloving thoughts and behaviors that produce them*

This is not explicitly mentioned in that passage at all, but I think it is implicit there. It is what the Course elsewhere calls “murder justified” (T-31.II.4:4). The extreme example of this is the remorseless criminal, who does horrible things while claiming he doesn’t feel bad about it at all—a claim that may well be true on the surface. Such a person denies the *state* of guilt in any sense of the term—even if he did attack someone, in his eyes there was a good reason for it—and thus denies the *feeling* of guilt as well: “Yeah, I killed the guy. Glad I did. He had it coming, and I’d do it again.”

This, of course, gives such a person license to attack with total impunity. In this extreme form, this is the stance of the sociopath. Indeed, in my experience, this is a major concern of critics of the Course when its concept of guiltlessness comes up: “If everybody’s guiltless, won’t people just run amok?” I think this is actually a reasonable question, given what usually goes by the name of “guiltlessness.”

And of course, we don’t have to be sociopaths to engage in our own version of this. We all do it in our own way: We attack in ways large and small, either deny the attacks or justify them with various rationalizations, and in this way proclaim our innocence. This is what the Course calls “the face of innocence” (T-31.V.2:3): our universal tendency to regard ourselves as good people full of sweetness and light, who only attack when (in our eyes) that evil world out there attacks us first, and we’re “forced” to defend ourselves.

Unfortunately, though, the face of innocence is just that: a *face*, a façade. The Course tells us that as long as we keep attacking, we will deep down be utterly convinced that we are in the state of guilt, and will therefore be pouring yet more gasoline on the flames of those guilt feelings. However absent those feelings may be on the surface, *they are there*. This is true even of the sociopaths. I have a friend who used to be a prison psychologist working with hardcore criminals, and I’ll never forget what he told me: Even the most remorseless of them, if my friend worked with them long enough, would eventually discover those buried feelings of guilt, and when they did, it was a shattering experience. Clearly, denial of guilt feelings doesn’t really solve the problem of guilt.

### *2. Neurotic guilt: wallowing in our feelings of guilt without changing the unloving thoughts and behaviors that produce them*

Jesus doesn’t say much about “neurotic” guilt feelings, but this is the picture that comes to my mind from what he does say. We’re all familiar with examples of this type of person too, are we not? An extreme example is the spouse abuser with his pattern of abusing, apologizing and begging for forgiveness, and then abusing again—and again and again. There’s also the hyper-religious person who keeps succumbing to temptations no matter how many times he tearfully swears “never again,” the alcoholic who goes on a bender every weekend despite repeatedly promising that she’ll never touch another drop, and even the dieter who wolfs down the chocolate cake and commits to restarting the diet—tomorrow.

Of course, all of us engage in this neurotic pattern to some degree. We’re convinced we’re in the *state* of guilt because of what we’ve done, the corresponding *feeling* of guilt arises accordingly, but we don’t do anything (at least not anything serious) to *change* the unloving behaviors that feed the beast of that guilt. Many of us have met someone who does this in an especially excessive way. I’ll never forget an individual I met who was continually saying “sorry” about every little thing. When I gently said to her that she really didn’t need to apologize so much, she said—you guessed it—“Sorry!”

Now, it must be said that all of this is a step up from the utter denial of guilt exhibited in the false guiltlessness described above. There is less denial going on here: When you are in neurotic guilt, at least you are honestly acknowledging that you have been unloving in some way, and that you are indeed feeling guilty as a result. However, there is a big problem with neurotic guilt feelings, a problem that Jesus points out in the passage we're discussing:

Neurotic guilt feelings do not help anyone...Neurotic guilt feelings are a device of the ego for "atoning" without sharing, and for asking for pardon without change. (T-5.V.5:1, 4)

This is the big problem with neurotic guilt, is it not? The person immersed in this kind of guilt may think that she is "good" because she's appropriately feeling guilt for her unloving actions, but she's not really doing anything to *stop* those unloving actions. She's therefore not actually helping anyone. And this passage suggests that from the ego's standpoint, this is exactly the point: to "atone" without actually being more generous and loving ("without sharing") and to ask for "pardon" without actually changing anything. It ensures that we'll keep on attacking, thus preserving both the apparent state of guilt and the feelings of guilt that come from it. We'll have to do better than this if we really want to undo guilt.

### 3. Helen's concept of healthy guilt feelings: being aware of our feelings of guilt as a way to change the unloving **behaviors** that produce them

Jesus, referring to Helen's concept, says this in our passage:

The distinction between neurotic and healthy guilt feelings has been made in terms of feelings which lead to a decision not to *repeat* the error, which is only part of healing. (T-5.V.6:2)

In other words, while the neurotic wallows in guilt without doing anything serious to change the behaviors that give rise to it, the healthy person uses guilt feelings as a kind of litmus test for determining when a change is called for. They are an indicator that unloving behavior—which is what I think Jesus mainly means by "error" here—*needs* to change, and the person works to change it. Helen's concept, then, is essentially that of what we normally call a decent human being: a person who experiences guilt when she does something unloving, and as a result does what she can to make amends and avoid repeating that unloving behavior in the future.

This is clearly a step up from neurotic guilt, because it is a step in the direction of helping people, of actually being more loving, of actual change. As I said in the beginning of this piece, Jesus praises Helen's concept, saying that this concept of healthy guilt feelings "has great merit" and that it is "part of healing." I think we should carefully note Jesus' stance here: He sees real value in acknowledging when we've done something unloving and then behaving differently. Changing unloving behavior to loving behavior is important to him—it is a good start. His stance is essentially "So far, so good."

But of course, we need to go even further, which leads to the next point in the continuum.

### 4. Jesus' concept of healthy guilt feelings: being aware of our feelings of guilt as a way to change—via accepting the Atonement from the Holy Spirit—the unloving **thoughts** and behaviors that produce them

Jesus takes us further in his critique of Helen's concept:

The concept of healthy guilt feelings has great merit, but without the concept of Atonement it lacks the healing potential it could hold. The distinction between neurotic and healthy guilt feelings has been made in terms of feelings which lead to a decision not to *repeat* the error, which is only part of healing. This concept therefore lacks the idea of *undoing* the error. What is really being advocated, then, is adopting a policy of sharing without a real *foundation*. (T-5.V.6:1-4)

The problem with Helen's concept, Jesus implies in this critique, is that Helen's concept is primarily about *behavior*. I qualify that statement with "primarily" because surely Helen embraced the idea of having more loving thoughts about people too. However, the reference to "not...*repeat[ing]* the error" suggests not repeating that unloving thing you *did*. After all, most of the time we feel guilty because we've *done* something wrong in relation to someone else. When we think an unloving thought about someone but don't act on it, we usually think we're off the hook. Indeed, as Jesus points

out in the early dictation, many of the psychological theorists Helen was familiar with taught in one way or another that as long as you don't act on your unloving thoughts, all is well.

So, as we've seen, Helen's concept of "healthy guilt feelings" amounts to an idea that all of us are familiar with: The good thing about guilt is that it can lead us to not repeat unloving behavior, and it can thus help us return to "sharing" in the sense of engaging in more loving and generous behavior from now on. Again, this is a good start—so far, so good. But all by itself, using guilt to avoid repeating the error is inadequate as a means of truly restoring love to our relationships, because it doesn't undo the deeper error at the root of our unloving behavior: our unloving *thoughts*. Therefore, our creditable attempt to return to sharing will not ultimately succeed, because it does not rest on a real foundation: loving thoughts grounded in the Atonement.

I'll talk more about the Atonement in a moment, but first I want to reframe what I've just said in terms of the distinction between the *state* of guilt and the *feeling* of guilt. In Helen's concept, we notice feelings of guilt, which we interpret to mean that we are in the state of guilt. So, to remove the state of guilt and thus alleviate those feelings of guilt, we try to stop the unloving behaviors that seem to be causing that state of guilt, and replace those behaviors with more loving ones. But this doesn't work, because what's really causing us to believe that we're in the state of guilt is the unloving thoughts *behind* our behavior. Changing the behavior alone doesn't change those unloving thoughts.

No, Jesus says, the only way to unleash the healing potential in Helen's concept of healthy guilt feelings is to bring "the concept of Atonement" into it. What does he mean? Jesus talks about Atonement in many ways throughout the pages of the Course, but here I want to draw specifically from a couple of places: first from a discussion in the "This Need Not Be" section of the Text (T-4.VI), and then from material that forms the immediate context of our passage.

The "This Need Not Be" material emphasizes the idea that whenever we experience *any* negative feeling—including guilt—it is because "in every case, you have thought wrongly about some brother that God created" (T-4.VI.3:2). The way out of the negative feeling is to "change your mind to think with God's" (T-4.VI.3:5), which means, in essence, to accept the Atonement. But in order to do this, we have to first change the wrong thought about our brother that got us into this mess in the first place: "Until you change your mind about those your ego has hurt, the Atonement cannot release you" (T-4.VI.7:4). To apply this to our discussion here in simple terms: Our feelings of guilt in this situation stem from our unloving thoughts about our brother, and so undoing our guilt through the Atonement begins with changing our minds—with the Holy Spirit's help—so that we have *loving* thoughts about this brother.

This replacement of unloving thoughts with loving thoughts toward the brother our ego has hurt is apparently the opening in our minds that lets the remedy of Atonement come through. Why is this so? Now we turn to the immediate context of our passage. Atonement, we are told there, is the recognition that "only what is loving *is* true" (T-5.V.3:3)—only our loving thoughts are true. Atonement is the Holy Spirit's reinterpretation of our fearful unloving thoughts and the guilt we feel as a result of them, a reinterpretation that enables us to *realize* that only our loving thoughts are true. It is thus the foundation for real sharing, for "Every loving thought held in any part of God belongs to every part. It is shared *because* it is loving" (T-5.V.8:4-5).

Can you see how this solves the problem that arises in Helen's concept? In Jesus' concept, as in Helen's, we first notice feelings of guilt, and this noticing is a good thing. But then, instead of interpreting those feelings as incontrovertible evidence that we are in the state of guilt, we first let the Holy Spirit undo the very thing that causes us to think we're in that state: With His help, we change our unloving thoughts toward our brother to loving thoughts. This then opens the door to Him undoing our feelings of guilt through the Atonement.

How does this happen? Those guilt feelings are undone because the Atonement is the recognition that "only what is loving *is* true." The loving thoughts we're having about our brother now (as a result of changing our mind about him) are the only thoughts that have ever been true here. Those unloving thoughts that we were having, on the other hand, were never true—they were just mistakes that have now been corrected. They did *not* place us in the state of guilt, and therefore there is no basis for feelings of guilt.

Once this remedy is accepted, we no longer need to play the game of trying to behave more lovingly to alleviate our guilt. Of course, we still *do* behave more lovingly as guided by the Holy Spirit, but now this loving behavior is a miraculous expression of truly loving thoughts. We now have a real foundation for sharing.

##### *5. True guiltlessness: being aware of our state of guiltlessness, thus no longer having feelings of guilt, and thus also no longer engaging in unloving thoughts and behaviors that would produce feelings of guilt*

Now we come to the end of the continuum, and notice how far we've come from the false guiltlessness at the beginning. In false guiltlessness, we deny our belief in our *state* of guilt, and do this by denying our *feelings* of guilt, which gives us license to behave in unloving ways. But here at the end of the continuum (which we don't come to fully until the very end of our spiritual journey, of course), we experience true guiltlessness: We know deeply that we are *not* in the

state of guilt, and so we have no feelings of guilt, and we naturally express our true guiltlessness through truly loving behavior. In their most extreme manifestations, false guiltlessness is the foundation of the sociopath, while true guiltlessness is the foundation of the saint. All the two ideas have in common is the word “guiltlessness.”

But how do we foster this state of true guiltlessness in daily life? How can we put this material into practice?

## Practicing true guiltlessness

Needless to say, the entire Course is a course in how to undo our seeming state of guilt through the Atonement, expressed in the form of miracles—which the Course calls “expressions of love”—performed for our brothers. But I’ve been struck in particular by a practice given at the end of chapter 5 of the Text (T-5.X) that echoes in so many ways our tour through the continuum. I will now take us through this practice (all references that follow will be from this section), using the framework of that continuum. I’ll be speaking of “you” throughout, and I encourage you to really go through this as an actual practice to undo guilt that you are experiencing right now.

Of course, to the degree that you are on the first level of the continuum, the state of false guiltlessness, no practice will do you any good, because you aren’t even aware of the *need* for a practice. Guilt feelings can be healthy precisely because they point us to that need. So, bring to mind guilt feelings that you are experiencing right now, specifically those that stem from your unloving actions toward another person. Notice how unpleasant those feelings are, how they sap your joy. Now, hear Jesus’ explanation of this lack of joy, and let his words sink in:

Whenever you are not wholly joyous, it is because you have reacted with a lack of love to some brother that God created. Perceiving this as sin, you become defensive because you *expect attack*. The decision to react in that way, however, is yours, and can therefore be undone. (7:1-3)

The problem is that “you have reacted with a lack of love to some brother that God created”—*this* brother. Because of this, you have concluded deep down that you are in the state of guilt; in your eyes, you have committed a sin. This is why you are having guilt feelings. And because of those guilt feelings, you expect attack as punishment for your sin. Perhaps you’re expecting retribution from the brother you have wronged, or perhaps you simply have a vague feeling that somehow, somewhere, the other shoe is going to drop. Can you get in touch with these feelings? Not a joyful state, to be sure! Fortunately, there is good news: Both your decision not to love your brother and your decision that you are a sinner can be undone. Thank God!

But *how* can all of this be undone? Perhaps you are condemning yourself—surely, a little self-flagellation will do the trick. But hear Jesus tell you that this is *not* the way:

It cannot be undone by repentance in the usual sense, because this implies guilt. If you allow yourself to feel guilty, you will reinforce the error, rather than allowing it to be undone for you. (7:4-5)

Think about how you are currently responding to your guilt feelings. Perhaps you are currently stuck on the second level of the continuum, wallowing in neurotic guilt feelings without really doing anything about them. Perhaps you have progressed to the third level and are actually trying to behave more lovingly in this situation, which is certainly a step up. But still, Jesus says, your guilt cannot ultimately be undone by “repentance in the usual sense,” because this implies that you are in the *state* of guilt. It’s healthy to recognize your guilt feelings, but as long as you *hold on* to them—as long as you “allow yourself to feel guilty” without accepting the real remedy for guilt—you’ll simply be reinforcing that seeming state of guilt and all the errors that stem from it, rather than letting the guilt be truly undone.

No, the only way to facilitate the undoing of both your seeming state of guilt and the feelings of guilt it produces is to change your *thoughts*, to make a new *decision*. Hear Jesus give you the way out:

The first step in the undoing is to recognize that you have actively decided wrongly, but can as actively decide otherwise. Be very firm with yourself in this, and keep yourself fully aware of the fact that the undoing process, which does *not* come from you, is nevertheless within you because God placed it there. *Your* part is merely to return your thinking to the point at which the error was made, and give it over to the Atonement in peace. (8:3-5)

The way out of your guilt is the fourth level of the continuum: to allow your unloving thoughts toward this brother (and the unloving behaviors that stem from them) to be undone through accepting the Atonement from the Holy Spirit.

“Your part is merely to return your thinking to the point at which the error was made”—the point where you decided not to love this brother, and decided to see yourself as a guilty sinner as a result—and give your mind “over to the Atonement in peace.” With the Holy Spirit’s help, you can change your lack of love *to* love, and thus will you come to recognize that only your love has ever been real. Your lack of love for this brother is just a mistake with no real consequences. Though you have feelings of guilt, you are not in the *state* of guilt, and never have been. Therefore, your feelings of guilt have no basis. *You are not guilty.*

To help you make this new decision to love your brother and let go of your belief that your lack of love has made you truly guilty, you can use the words Jesus has given you for this very purpose. So...

Say to yourself the following as sincerely as you can, remembering that the Holy Spirit will respond fully to your slightest invitation:

*I must have decided wrongly, because I am not at peace.*

*I made the decision myself, but I can also decide otherwise.*

*I **will** to decide otherwise, because I **want** to be at peace.*

*I do not feel guilty, because the Holy Spirit will undo all the consequences of my wrong decision if I will let Him.*

*I **will** to let Him by allowing Him to decide for God for me. (9:1-6)*

Feel the liberation of those last two sentences especially. You need not hold on to those feelings of guilt, because you are not in the state of guilt. Your lack of love is only a mistake, and the Holy Spirit will undo all the consequences of that mistake if you will let him. He may well accomplish this undoing in part through *you*, in the form of guiding you to extend miraculous loving behavior to the person you had formerly hurt. So, open your mind and heart, and listen for guidance about what to do to communicate your reborn love for your brother. You’ve chosen to let the Holy Spirit decide for God for you, and He will not fail to show you exactly what to do.

You now have a real foundation for sharing, for you are sharing with your brother the loving thoughts that the entire Sonship shares with our loving and beloved Father. And now, rise with joy and walk the path to God with this brother, knowing that you have taken one more step to the fifth and final level of the continuum, the light that awakens us all from the dream: the recognition that we are all guiltless, now and forever.