

A Course in Miracles

the Original Dictation

An Introduction to the Original Dictation Project

Phase I – The Hugh Lynn Cayce Manuscript

Phase II – The Urtext Manuscripts

Phase III – The Shorthand Notes Manuscripts

Phase IV

an eclectic

Critical Edition

by Doug Thompson

“You will see miracles through your hands through Me.”

On October 21, 1965, *A Course in Miracles* began with Helen Schucman writing those words in her *Shorthand Notebooks*.

Most Course students have been told and believed that the first words of the Course were “This is a Course in Miracles, please take notes” and that those notebooks were accurately copied with only a few omissions of personal material such that the 1975 print edition of the Course is “virtually unchanged” from that original dictation received by Schucman.

That popular story is mistaken. The real first line is: “You will see miracles through your hands through Me.” The popular story about the editing tells us that Jesus’ instructions were followed, the material was not changed, and the original dictation was published. The documentary evidence of the Course’s history tells a *very* different story. The truth is far more interesting, more human and more miraculous than the myths.

“I come, I come. Behold Me. I am here for I am you; in Christ, for Christ, My Own beloved Son, the glory of the infinite, the joy of Heaven and the holy peace of earth, returned to Christ and from His hand to Me.”

And with these words the seventh volume of the *Urtext Manuscripts, The Gifts of God*, concludes the Course. The “Voice” and personality shifts dramatically in the final pages from that of Jesus of Nazareth whose voice we hear previously, to that of God the Father Himself, in these dramatic concluding words which “close the circle” with which the original dictation began.

This theme of “through the hands” of Christ and ourselves, whereby miracles emanate from God, and through the hands of Christ turn the Peace of God into the Peace of Earth, and then return to the Father through the hands of Christ, is a dominant literary and poetic metaphor used throughout the Course, with which its original form begins and ends. Sadly, you will find the “bookends” of the dominant theme of the Course were both omitted from all abridged versions.

The documentary evidence sometimes confirms what we’ve been told, sometimes refutes it, but usually informs us of things few ever suspected, adding clarity and significance to the teaching of the Course and revealing it is far grander and more inclusive than any of the stories have suggested. *A Course in Miracles* is a LOT more than most have yet seen. The *Original Dictation Project* is all about restoring the full grandeur of the Course as originally dictated to the light of day and the hearts of men.

Between 1965 and 1975, the original dictation in those *Shorthand Notebooks* underwent a vast amount of editing and retyping. The 4,000-odd pages of the *Notes* were typed up then edited and retyped again and again and again, mostly by Schucman with the help of her colleague William (Bill) Thetford, (the two “Scribes” of ACIM) and in the later years by Schucman with the help of Kenneth Wapnick.

Most of this was done in the academic offices shared by the two professors of Medical Psychology at Columbia University in New York. At the time both Schucman and Thetford maintained busy professional careers as professors and researchers. Without the time or resources to do proper proofreading, not always understanding the material themselves, and often dealing with interpersonal conflicts and struggles, the fact that they got anything into print in 1975 is something of a miracle itself.

We must recall that in 1975 they didn’t know what this really was, had no idea it would go on to be a major spiritual phenomenon, and certainly no idea it would come to be recognized as “Scripture”

by many readers. They, rather obviously, didn't regard it that way. I'm equally sure that St. Paul, when writing his epistles, had no idea they would one day be regarded as "scripture" by millions, and neither, I'm sure did many of the early copyists. It is just that lack of recognition of the significance of the work in its early months and years that leads to the lack of care and precision in transmission which so baffles later readers. How could they be so careless with such important words? The answer is simple, they didn't perceive their importance the way we do.

They knew not what they did!

Kenneth Wapnick, who met the pair in 1973 and helped get the book into print, reminisces about the situation he encountered in their offices at Columbia University in his book *Absence from Felicity*. That title summarises his experience of the Scribes and the editing. In the final phase of editing, the Scribes experienced intense inner and interpersonal conflict. They also experienced intense conflicts with the material itself. The reason is pretty obvious, they were *not* listening to Jesus and they were directly ignoring his explicit instructions about the editing. The most basic instruction was that the editing was Thetford's job, not Schucman's, and she just wouldn't let go of her compulsion to "improve" the material according to her own lights, and fears. Toward the end, the editing was done by Wapnick and Schucman without Thetford, and Thetford, who was not *allowed* to perform his assignment, gracefully withdrew and began practicing the Course.

In those ten years of typing and editing and retyping in the near-total absence of proofreading, many hundreds of copying mistakes crept into the work inadvertently. The Scribes were almost certainly entirely *unaware* of this. The *only* way to discover such errors is careful proofreading. From version to version they were not always spotted and corrected, so while in each new typing, some previous errors were corrected, *more* new inadvertent errors crept in.

As Robert Perry has noted, “the more they edited it, the worse it got.”

In addition, the Scribes’ own fear and misunderstanding of the extensive material on sex and possession led them to omit that segment. That major teaching begins with the words “I want to finish the instructions about sex, because this is an area the miracle worker MUST understand.” This missing chapter is a central pillar of the “foundation” on which the rest of the Course rests.

The confusion of sexual and possession fallacies, the close relationship between the miracle and the sexual impulse, and the danger of confusing the two, are central issues in the life experience of nearly every human being. In the original Course they are met head on with penetrating, yet gentle insight.

There is a lot of debate and confusion in the Course community today about what the Course *would* teach about sex and sexual relationships. One reason is that what the Course *does teach* was omitted from all later versions.

There are some obvious reasons, the Scribes both had some severe issues with sex and sexuality and in that era it was perhaps just deemed “too hot to handle.”

The abridged version of the Course published in 1975 was thus riddled with inadvertent copying mistakes and unfortunate omissions of material vital to the student’s complete understanding and practice of the Course’s teaching. While most of these mistakes are individually minor and have little impact on the meaning of the whole, some are more important. Cumulatively, the thousands of small mistakes and omissions have the effect of dulling the brilliant clarity of the original dictation, leaving a result that is sometimes choppy and disjointed and very difficult to read, especially for newcomers to the work, because much of the textual “connective tissue” between the “bare bones concepts” is missing, along with

explanations, examples and context which clarify the Author's intended meaning.

Experienced Course students can read the abridged chapter 1 that is found in the FIP version, and the only slightly-less abridged chapter 1 that is found in the *Hugh Lynn Cayce* version, and fill in *some of* the missing bits of context and have little difficulty understanding it. Can you remember the first time you tried to read chapter 1 though, knowing very little about the Course? It's a very difficult read and most first time readers are more confused than informed by it. Concepts, and concepts that are often entirely new to a first time reader, are packed into paragraphs with high density and strike the reader like a machine-gun burst. There is no time to absorb one before the next appears, and little of the original explanation survived the editing.

The *Urtext* chapter one has 18, 131 words. By 1975 that had been cut to 5,744 words. And in the *Urtext*, most of the "personal material" which was not of 'generalizable' relevance and value had already been removed from the *Shorthand Notes*. Originally it is longer, contains much more explanatory detail, and is in fact a "page-turner" which doesn't just outline the fundamental concepts, it explains and illustrates them with examples from the daily life of the Scribes. Yes, there are some spots in the original where Schucman is taking things down in point form and some editing is required to make for smooth prose. But rather than "clarifying" these sections, the editors simply removed them and in so-doing left some tragic holes in the thought system being presented.

The editing did not very often fundamentally *change or distort the message*, save by omitting some key bits of it, but it resulted in a *Text* volume that lacks much of the original clarity, crispness, simplicity and directness of the original dictation and reads more like a list of points expressed often in rather cryptic jargon than a comprehensive explanation of a way of thinking addressed to an

audience which has absolutely zero familiarity with the Course as of yet.

But that's what the first chapter needs to do, begin the explanation in very simple language and very concrete examples to begin to build the student's understanding. In the abridged version, many first time readers conclude either "this is too complex for me, it's over my head" or "I need some teacher to explain this, I have on the vaguest idea what it is trying to say." Both are unfortunate and both are largely avoided if the student is simply given access to what Jesus actually said!

Most of the most severe editing happened in the first eight chapters, and wasn't the result of the final editing in 1973, most of the omissions had already been made by 1972, but these chapters present the foundational concepts on which the rest of the Course rests. Misunderstanding of the foundation means misunderstanding of the whole thought system erected upon it.

Schucman recorded these words in her *Notes*:

"The next part of this course rests too heavily on the earlier part not to REQUIRE its study. Without this, you will become much too fearful when the unexpected DOES occur to make constructive use of it. However, as you study the notes, you will see some of the obvious implications, unless you still persist in misusing the defense of mental retardation."

Jesus is referring here to the first three chapters where we find most of the most serious omissions and copying mistakes. Even a small flaw in the *foundation* will have an influence on everything erected on that foundation. These errors are the most crucial ones to correct.

Until late 1999, the Scribes' original handwritten and typed manuscript material was kept hidden. Since then a great deal has become available for study, and for ten years now I've been poring over the 6,248 manuscript pages, most of which are in a mix of shorthand and longhand. Comparing that to the version published

in 1975 has revealed about 50,000 words that were omitted and roughly as many that were changed. While some of that omitted material is of a “personal advice” nature and only tangential to the Course, a great deal strikes me as *intended* for the Course and was omitted in error. Then there are the thousands of obviously inadvertent copying mistakes of a letter, a word, a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph or even entire pages throughout all the volumes.

Due to the huge number of pages and some serious legibility issues with some of those pages, not to mention having to hold down a full time job to finance the work through most of those years, the work has sometimes proceeded in a way that seemed very slow.

Since I view *A Course in Miracles* as a body of writing at least as important to the spiritual seeker as the *Bible*, and being trained in Biblical Studies, it was clear to me from my first awareness of the existence of this body of manuscripts, that the material would have to be carefully studied and would eventually lead to reconsideration of the “official text” of the Course. The 1975 version that has come to be recognized as “the standard Course” has thousands of mistakes and many of the interpretive controversies and ‘hard to understand bits’ result directly from copying mistakes. Either key interpretive phrases are missing, or the material is simply mangled. Some passages which read very poorly and whose meaning is unclear in the 1975 version are perfectly clear when the copying mistakes are fixed and the original dictation is examined.

Since nobody else seemed very interested in doing this or sponsoring this kind of Course scholarship, I began in the year 2000 to proofread the early text transcripts of the typed manuscripts in order to make a thoroughly accurate machine readable text available for study. As that huge proofreading job of the *HLC* and the *Urtext* drew to a close, a photocopy of most of the *Shorthand Notes* became available and I began to learn Schucman’s handwriting and transcribe those documents, a work that is still in progress.

As the proofreading of each volume concluded and I was confident that I had a reasonably accurate text, these have been published both on my website and in some cases as printed books.

As the tenth anniversary of the initial discovery of the *Hugh Lynn Cayce Manuscript* is just two weeks away, it is a fitting time to announce that reasonably accurate machine readable transcripts of all known scribal manuscripts of the *Text* volume of the Course are now available. With those computer files it is fairly easy to identify each change that was made to the original dictation throughout the entire editing process. With this information it is usually quite straightforward to determine which changes were inadvertent copying mistakes, which were genuine corrections of earlier errors, and which are “uncertain.” Most are obviously either inadvertent mistakes or genuine dictated corrections.

I think there will be few who will dispute that genuine corrections should be preserved and inadvertent copying mistakes should be corrected. If only that much were done, a version of the Course would emerge that is far more accurate, clear and readable than any version in existence today. And that task, though large, is simple and there is little that is controversial to anyone about fixing typos.

Some of the editing changes involve re-writing for style and have little effect on the actual meaning of a passage. In my view, most of Schucman’s stylistic modifications add nothing, correct no genuine error, and often tend to obscure the original meaning to some extent. I’d restore most of those to their original wording.

Some changes involve re-writing for content, where the actual meaning of a passage is altered. While every one of those must be considered *potentially* as a genuine dictated correction of a genuine original mistake, I believe that careful study and research will agree with my preliminary conclusions, that most simply indicate the person doing the re-writing didn’t understand the original material,

thought there was a mistake where there was not, and ended up distorting rather than clarifying the message.

I would certainly argue that only those editing changes which clearly correct a genuine mistake should be preserved and otherwise the material should be restored to its original form. I have encountered few who, after careful examination of the earlier and later readings where there is substantial re-writing for style or content, don't agree that the earlier form dictated by Jesus is usually preferable to the latter form re-written by Schucman, Thetford or Wapnick.

While that's my opinion after studying many thousands of editing interventions, that most are unwarranted and in no way improve the original dictation, that is just my opinion. What I think is far less subjective is the idea that in each case where there are variant readings between what was originally dictated and what ended up emerging in 1975, the variants should be carefully and prayerfully examined with the aim of establishing which variant is the most authentic and accurate representation of the Author's intent.

There are then two kinds of "restoration" work here. The first involves the fairly straightforward task of fixing inadvertent copying mistakes. The second involves the careful review of intentional scribal alterations with the idea of establishing which are real corrections and clarifications, and which are editorial mistakes. Obviously the first part is easier than the second part.

The first three phases of the *Original Dictation Project* involved assembling the raw material and the tools. The raw material obviously involves accurate copies of the historical scribal manuscripts.

Phase I was the preparation of the *HLC Manuscript*

Phase II was the preparation of the *Urtext Manuscripts*

Phase III was the preparation of the *Shorthand Notes Manuscripts*

While Phase III is not yet completed, there are still many *Notes* pages for which we have no transcript, the most important material, the *Text* volume is at a stage of completion, requiring only final proofing, that enables us to actually begin laying the foundation for Phase IV.

The tools involve the standard toolbox of textual scholarship, catalogues, indices and concordances and cross-referencing charts such that we can actually identify passages precisely and easily for comparison.

With these accurate transcripts of the scribal manuscripts and the appropriate tools we can begin Phase IV: the identification and evaluation of the variant readings.