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A
RETURN
TO
LOVE

Reflections on the Principles of
A COURSE IN MIRACLES



Marianne Williamson

*A Return
to Love*

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A COURSE IN MIRACLES



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“Be not afraid, but let your world be lit by miracles.”

—A Course in Miracles



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*For both my fathers,
who art in Heaven.*

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PREFACE



I grew up in a middle-class Jewish family, laced with the magical overtones of an eccentric father. When I was thirteen, in 1965, he took me to Saigon to show me what war was. The Vietnam War was beginning to rev up and he wanted me to see bullet holes firsthand. He didn't want the military-industrial complex to eat my brain and convince me war was okay.

My grandfather was very religious and sometimes I would go to synagogue with him on Saturday mornings. When the ark was opened during the service, he would bow and begin to cry. I would cry too, but I don't know

whether I was crying out of a budding religious fervor, or simply because he was.

When I went to high school, I took my first philosophy class and decided God was a crutch I didn't need. What kind of God would let children starve, I argued, or people get cancer, or the Holocaust happen? The innocent faith of a child met the pseudointellectualism of a high school sophomore head on. I wrote a Dear John letter to God. I was depressed as I wrote it, but it was something I felt I had to do because I was too well-read now to believe in God.

During college, a lot of what I learned from professors was definitely extra-curricular. I left school to grow vegetables, but I don't remember ever growing any. There are a lot of things from those years I can't remember. Like a lot of people at that time—late sixties, early seventies—I was pretty wild. Every door marked “no” by conventional standards seemed to hold the key to some lascivious pleasure I had to have. Whatever sounded outrageous, I wanted to do. And usually, I did.

I didn't know what to do with my life, though I remember my parents kept begging me to do *something*. I went from relationship to relationship, job to job, city to city, looking for some sense of identity or purpose, some feeling that my life had finally kicked in. I knew I had talent, but I didn't know at what. I knew I had intelligence, but I was too frantic to apply it to my own circumstances. I went into therapy several times, but it rarely made an impact. I sank deeper and deeper into

my own neurotic patterns, seeking relief in food, drugs, people, or whatever else I could find to distract me from myself. I was always trying to make something happen in my life, but nothing much happened except all the drama I created around things not happening.

There was some huge rock of self-loathing sitting in the middle of my stomach during those years, and it got worse with every phase I went through. As my pain deepened, so did my interest in philosophy: Eastern, Western, academic, esoteric. Kierkegaard, the I Ching, existentialism, radical death-of-God Christian theology, Buddhism, and more. I always sensed there was some mysterious cosmic order to things, but I could never figure out how it applied to my own life.

One day I was sitting around smoking marijuana with my brother, and he told me that everybody thought I was weird. “It’s like you have some kind of virus,” he said. I remember thinking I was going to shoot out of my body in that moment. I felt like an alien. I had often felt as though life was a private club and everybody had received the password except me. Now was one of those times. I felt other people knew a secret that I didn’t know, but I didn’t want to ask them about it because I didn’t want them to know I didn’t know.

By my mid-twenties, I was a total mess.

I believed other people were dying inside too, just like me, but they couldn’t or wouldn’t talk about it. I kept thinking there was something very important that no one was discussing. I didn’t have the words myself,

but I was sure that something was fundamentally off in the world. How could everybody think that this stupid game of “making it in the world”—which I was actually embarrassed I didn’t know how to play—could be all there is to our being here?

One day in 1977, I saw a set of blue books with gold lettering sitting on someone’s coffee table in New York City. I opened to the introduction. It read,

“This is A Course in Miracles. It is a required course. Only the time you take it is voluntary. Free will does not mean that you can establish the curriculum. It means only that you can elect what you want to take at a given time. The Course does not aim at teaching the meaning of love, for that is beyond what can be taught. It does aim, however, at removing the blocks to the awareness of love’s presence, which is your natural inheritance.”

I remember thinking that sounded rather intriguing, if not arrogant. Reading further, however, I noticed Christian terminology throughout the books. This made me nervous. Although I had studied Christian theology in school, I had kept it at an intellectual distance. Now I felt the threat of a more personal significance. I put the books back on the table.

It took another year before I picked them up again—another year, and another year’s misery. Then I was ready.

This time I was so depressed I didn't even notice the language. This time, I knew immediately that the Course had something very important to teach me. It used traditional Christian terms, but in decidedly nontraditional, nonreligious ways. I was struck, as most people are, by the profound authority of its voice. It answered questions I had begun to think were unanswerable. It talked about God in brilliant psychological terms, challenging my intelligence and never insulting it. It's a bit cliché to say this, but I felt like I had come home.

The Course seemed to have a basic message: *relax*. I was confused to hear that because I had always associated relaxing with resigning. I had been waiting for someone to explain to me how to fight the fight, or to fight the fight for me, and now this book suggested that I surrender the fight completely. I was surprised but so relieved. I had long suspected I wasn't made for worldly combat.

For me, this was not just another book. This was my personal teacher, my path out of hell. As I began reading the Course and following its Workbook exercises, I could feel almost immediately that the changes it produced inside of me were positive. I felt happy. I felt like I was beginning to calm down. I began to understand myself, to get some hook on why my relationships had been so painful, why I could never stay with anything, why I hated my body. Most importantly, I began to have some sense that I could change. Studying the Course unleashed huge amounts of hopeful energy inside me,

energy that had been turning darker and more self-destructive every day.

The Course, a self-study program of spiritual psychotherapy contained in three books, claims no monopoly on God. It is a statement of universal spiritual themes. There's only one truth, spoken different ways, and the Course is just one path to it out of many. If it's your path, however, you know it. For me, the Course was a breakthrough experience intellectually, emotionally, and psychologically. It freed me from a terrible emotional pain.

I wanted that "awareness of love's presence" that I had read about, and over the next five years I studied the Course passionately. As my mother said at the time, I "read it like a menu." In 1983, I began sharing my understanding of the Course with a small gathering of people in Los Angeles. The group began to grow. Since then, my lecture audiences have grown significantly here and abroad. I have had the opportunity to see how relevant this material is to people throughout the world.

A Return to Love is based on what I have learned from *A Course in Miracles*. It is about some of the Course's basic principles as I understand them and relate them to various issues that affect our daily lives.

A Return to Love is about the practice of love, as a strength and not a weakness, as a daily answer to the problems that confront us. How is love a practical solution? This book is written as a guide to the miraculous application of love as a balm on every wound. Whether

our psychic pain is in the area of relationships, health, career, or elsewhere, love is a potent force, the cure, the Answer.

Americans are not that big on philosophy. We're very big on action, however, once we understand the reason for it. As we begin to understand more deeply why love is such a necessary element in the healing of the world, a shift will occur in how we live our lives within and without.

My prayer is that this book might help someone. I have written it with an open heart. I hope you'll read it with an open mind.

Marianne Williamson
Los Angeles, CA

INTRODUCTION



When we were born, we were programmed perfectly. We had a natural tendency to focus on love. Our imaginations were creative and flourishing, and we knew how to use them. We were connected to a world much richer than the one we connect to now, a world full of enchantment and a sense of the miraculous.

So what happened? Why is it that we reached a certain age, looked around, and the enchantment was gone?

Because we were taught to focus elsewhere. We were taught to think unnaturally. We were taught a very bad

philosophy, a way of looking at the world that contradicts who we are.

We were taught to think thoughts like competition, struggle, sickness, finite resources, limitation, guilt, bad, death, scarcity, and loss. We began to think these things, and so we began to know them. We were taught that things like grades, being good enough, money, and doing things the right way, are more important than love. We were taught that we're separate from other people, that we have to compete to get ahead, that we're not quite good enough the way we are. We were taught to see the world the way that others had come to see it. It's as though, as soon as we got here, we were given a sleeping pill. The thinking of the world, which is not based on love, began pounding in our ears the moment we hit shore.

Love is what we were born with. Fear is what we have learned here. The spiritual journey is the relinquishment—or unlearning—of fear and the acceptance of love back into our hearts. Love is the essential existential fact. It is our ultimate reality and our purpose on earth. To be consciously aware of it, to experience love in ourselves and others, is the meaning of life.

Meaning doesn't lie in things. Meaning lies in us. When we attach value to things that aren't love—the money, the car, the house, the prestige—we are loving things that can't love us back. We are searching for meaning in the meaningless. Money, of itself, means nothing. Material things, of themselves, mean nothing. It's not that they're bad. It's that they're nothing.

We came here to co-create with God by extending love. Life spent with any other purpose in mind is meaningless, contrary to our nature, and ultimately painful. It's as though we've been lost in a dark, parallel universe where things are loved more than people. We overvalue what we perceive with our physical senses, and under-value what we know to be true in our hearts.

Love isn't seen with the physical eyes or heard with physical ears. The physical senses can't perceive it; it's perceived through another kind of vision. Metaphysicians call it the Third Eye, esoteric Christians call it the vision of the Holy Spirit, and others call it the Higher Self. Regardless of what it's called, love requires a different kind of "seeing" than we're used to—a different kind of knowing or thinking. Love is the intuitive knowledge of our hearts. It's a "world beyond" that we all secretly long for. An ancient memory of this love haunts all of us all the time, and beckons us to return.

Love isn't material. It's energy. It's the feeling in a room, a situation, a person. Money can't buy it. Sex doesn't guarantee it. It has nothing at all to do with the physical world, but it can be expressed nonetheless. We experience it as kindness, giving, mercy, compassion, peace, joy, acceptance, non-judgment, joining, and intimacy.

Fear is our shared lovelessness, our individual and collective hells. It's a world that seems to press on us from within and without, giving constant false testimony to the meaninglessness of love. When fear is expressed,

we recognize it as anger, abuse, disease, pain, greed, addiction, selfishness, obsession, corruption, violence, and war.

Love is within us. It cannot be destroyed, but can only be hidden. The world we knew as children is still buried within our minds. I once read a delightful book called *The Mists of Avalon*. The mists of Avalon are a mythical allusion to the tales of King Arthur. Avalon is a magical island that is hidden behind huge impenetrable mists. Unless the mists part, there is no way to navigate your way to the island. But unless you believe the island is there, the mists won't part.

Avalon symbolizes a world beyond the world we see with our physical eyes. It represents a miraculous sense of things, the enchanted realm that we knew as children. Our childlike self is the deepest level of our being. It is who we really are and what is real doesn't go away. The truth doesn't stop being the truth just because we're not looking at it. Love merely becomes clouded over, or surrounded by mental mists.

Avalon is the world we knew when we were still connected to our softness, our innocence, our spirit. It's actually the same world we see now, but informed by love, interpreted gently, with hope and faith and a sense of wonder. It's easily retrieved, because perception is a choice. The mists part when we believe that Avalon is behind them.

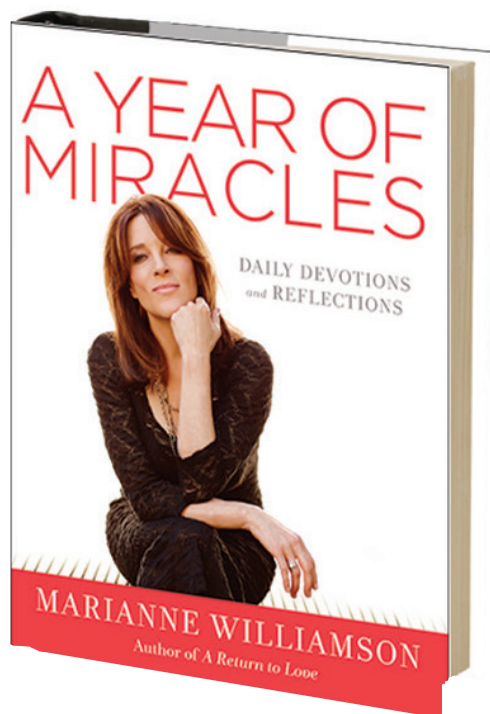
And that's what a miracle is: a parting of the mists, a shift in perception, a return to love.

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