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SEARCHING FOR THE SOUL of AMERICA

an interview with JACOB NEEDLEMAN

D. Patrick Miller

Several months after the fall of the World Trade Center, President George W. Bush held a press conference at which he was asked by a reporter how the immense tragedy had changed him personally. The Chief Executive hesitated briefly before answering, "Ask my wife. . . . I don't spend much time looking in the mirror."

In his response, our nation's leader revealed much about the contemporary American character: We are a people of action who don't spend much time reflecting on our actions, our motives, or ourselves. We simply presume that we're good folks who have everyone's best interest at heart — and then proceed to persuade, cajole, and intimidate the rest of the world's peoples to accept our well-intentioned actions, whether they like them or not.

But when those immense towers crashed to earth with such a stunning loss of life, our still-young nation's forward momentum seemed to come to a halt. Suddenly we realized that we would "never be the same" and that the time may have come to start taking stock of our lives in a new way. Even Larry King said so.

If philosopher Jacob Needleman is right, America was always meant to be a place where deep reflection and assessment of one's values, motives, and potential could flourish. In his latest book, The American Soul: Rediscovering the Wisdom of the Founders *(Tarcher), Needleman writes that "America was once the hope of the world," and not just because it symbolized political liberty and freedom from want. "The deeper hope of America was its vision of what humanity is and can become." He uses the writings and speeches of such icons as Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, and Lincoln to delineate his transformative vision of America.*

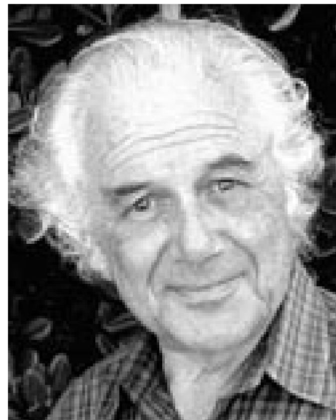

Photo: D. Patrick Miller

But Needleman gives equal time in his book to what he calls "the crimes of America" — namely, our early legacy of slavery and the genocide of the Native American people. "To a great extent, the material success of America rests on these crimes and others like

them," he says. But he urges his readers to take stock of America's virtues and failures in a way that might yield more telling sentiments than pride on the one hand or guilt on the other.

"The great wisdom," he writes, "whispers to us from ancient times of another kind of confrontation with what is good and what is evil in ourselves; another kind of hope, compared to which that which we call optimism is dangerously naive and childish; and another kind of remorse, compared to which that which we call guilt is impotent and self-deceitful."

The self-confrontation Needleman suggests is the kind of inner work that eventually yields more than just a new opinion of ourselves. It is the work that slowly but surely yields a new self entirely. Perhaps by such a process America itself might eventually achieve the potential that our Founding Fathers glimpsed. But the process will be tremendously more difficult than simply asking our spouses how we're doing.

Jacob Needleman has been provoking readers to look at their lives in a new way throughout his long career, which has produced such landmark books as Lost Christianity *(Element Books Ltd.),* The Heart of Philosophy *(HarperSanFrancisco), and* Money and the Meaning of Life *(Currency/Doubleday). Born in Philadelphia, he went to Harvard with the intention of becoming a doctor, but got sidetracked by a fascination with deep philosophical questions. He ended up with a Ph.D. — from Yale — in philosophy, and has taught philosophy at San Francisco State University for the last forty years. Instead of instructing his students in dry academic argument, Needleman focuses on the sort of "why are we here?" inquiries that most professors tend to avoid because the questions have spiritual ramifications.*

In our first conversation, published in The Sun *more than twelve years ago, Needleman and I discussed the pros and cons of the popular mysticism that was then sweeping through American culture. Recently we sat down again to discuss American culture and whether it will achieve the potential its Founders had in mind.*

Miller: In your new book you argue that the Founding Fathers intentionally created a constitutional framework that would allow the inner life of the citizenry to flourish. How do you know whether they really meant for Americans to develop their inner lives?

Needleman: I can't say what actually went on in their minds, but when I look at their writings, I do see signs of the spiritual quest. The spirituality of this country does not necessarily have to do with sectarian religion. Spirituality simply means inwardness of the unselfish variety. It's very clear that the Founders' ideas of individuality had nothing to do with the adolescent concept of individuality that we have today — that is, doing or saying anything one wants in order to appear clever

Photo: William Carter

and original. To many of the Founders, individuality meant the effort to acknowledge and obey the higher law within.

Miller: For a government even to suggest that part of its function is to guarantee its citizens' right to "the pursuit of happiness" strikes me as an essentially mystical undertaking. Has any other nation put forth happiness as part of its vision?

Needleman: If you view happiness in terms of self-realization and spiritual fulfillment, then the great theocracies of ancient times, such as in India and Tibet, were essentially devoted to the happiness of their people. For Plato, and many others after him, the whole purpose of governance was to enable people to relate to "the Good" — his word for God, or "the highest reality." But of course it may be that no actual government has ever fulfilled that ideal.

We also have to recognize a distinction made by Thomas Paine, concerning the difference between government and society. He argued that government is necessarily tough and punitive and often operates by the sanction of physical force. Society, on the other hand, is softer, more aesthetic and ethical; it's the way humans relate to each other.

Nations are not people; they are a lower, not higher, organism that cannot be judged the way we judge individual human beings. Nations must have honorable values and not be fundamentally criminal, but a nation exists primarily to protect its society.

If you confuse these two concepts, you may believe that a government should behave like the society it defends. That's a serious mistake and can lead to misplaced criticism of the way government operates. In my book I suggest that the deepest purpose of the United States government is to provide conditions under which our society can flourish spiritually as well as materially. That doesn't mean that we should expect our government or its functionaries to be spiritual or to have a highly developed consciousness.

Miller: What exactly did the Founding Fathers mean by "happiness"?

Needleman: Obviously the happiness they were talking about has nothing to do with wish fulfillment or getting everything you want. In fact, every spiritual teaching will tell you that wish fulfillment definitely *isn't* happiness. The great discovery of adulthood is that getting what you want doesn't by itself make you happy.

What does make you happy is to establish contact with a principle within yourself that orders your life and opens you up to loving others, and to loving something higher than yourself. So happiness is discovering truth within yourself, and then trying to live according to that truth. The Founders understood that this kind of happiness can be pursued only by a society with a certain type of government — one that would allow us the political liberty to search for conscience, while also allowing us the material support that this search requires. As a society, we do need material well-being, but our ultimate purpose is the search for conscience. I think that is what the Founding Fathers meant by "the pursuit of happiness." I'm calling for a new mythology, a new story of America. I believe that many of the Founders had an impulse and an intent to look within.

What we know of Jefferson suggests that he understood the crime of slavery precisely because he owned slaves. . . . Very few people today would say they believe in polluting the environment, but most of us drive cars. Jefferson, too, participated in a sin of his times. But what he believed in, fought for, and accomplished transcends his personal sins and weaknesses.

Miller: What's the difference between mythologizing the Founders and simple hero worship?

Needleman: To mythologize is to bring whatever a great person stood for into a concrete, emotionally valid focus — a useful representation of an ideal. Hero worship is childish or adolescent and often based on unimportant qualities. It says that a great man or woman was a better human being than everyone else. That's why hero worship is shattered by the discovery of the hero's weaknesses.

A person achieves mythological status when he or she represents an ideal greater than his or her personal character. For instance, Thomas Jefferson represents the ideal of equality espoused in the Declaration of Independence. The fact that he owned slaves may cause us to think less of him as a person, but it does not necessarily detract from his myth.

What we know of Jefferson suggests that he understood the crime of slavery precisely because he owned slaves. Regarding slavery, he once wrote, "When I consider that God is just, I fear for the future of our country." He knew that the country had the wolf by the ears; it couldn't let go of it, and it couldn't defeat it. Real passion for change is rooted in remorse. I think he personally felt the crime of slavery and knew that it had to change, whether he could manage that change in his own life or not. Very few people today would say they believe in polluting the environment, but most of us drive cars. Jefferson, too, participated in a sin of his times. But what he believed in, fought for, and accomplished transcends his personal sins and weaknesses.

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