

Rediscovering
the Wisdom of
the Founders

The American Soul

JACOB NEEDLEMAN



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Where there is no vision, the people perish. PROVERBS 29:18

To my teachers

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Preamble

He used to call himself “the last American.” In fact, he seemed anything but American—with his commanding British accent, his aristocratic bearing and his bred-in-the-bone sense of form, always and in everything. I would smile to myself when he spoke like that. I was born here, after all. How could a foreigner, even a man as great-hearted as he was, lay such claim to America? Only now do I begin to understand what he meant, and only now do I see how deep his love for America really was.

It was the summer of 1974. The Vietnam War was tearing the country apart. The image of America’s invincibility and goodness was crashing down around us. I had gathered a group to meet him at his summer house overlooking San Francisco Bay—about fifteen people, most of whom were my students, and a few like myself from the older generation, who could not accept the judgment against America that was rising into the world through the moral agony of the younger generation. I had been encountering this judgment every day in my classes at the university, but I continued to turn away from it, unwilling to question the fundamental goodness of my country.

I had brought some students and colleagues to meet this man, whom I had long considered remarkable for his wisdom and wide-ranging intelligence. I knew that although before World War II he had pursued a diplomatic career in Great Britain, his life had soon taken him in quite a different direction; and never once in all the years I had known him had I heard him say much about purely political questions. I never doubted that he was a shrewd observer of modern life, and his success in business was evidence of his worldly acumen. But with him, the main issue was always the path of self-knowledge, the need to awaken from the illusions about oneself that hold humanity in their grip and that prevent us from seeing reality and living according to conscience. I had never known anyone who could speak with more insight about the nature of this path, this way of seeking that lies at the root of all the great spiritual philosophies and traditions of the world. The quarrels of nations, the fervor of patriotism, the programs of social movements, the luster of heroic figures or partisan symbols: I was sure that all this was to him part of the sleep of the human race. And the task of waking up demanded, among other things, the struggle to free oneself from the falsehoods and attachments that gave these social and political phenomena their hypnotic power.

And so it astonished me when he suddenly interrupted one of the younger people who was once again speaking of America with contempt, condemning not only its war policy but the whole structure of its government, the injustice that they felt was built into its institutions and its laws and that had shaped its entire history. America was hypocritically betraying all that it claimed to stand for. American corporations were raping nature and the world. The media were under the thumb of American greed, blanketing the earth with a global consumerism that was destroying the values of simpler, nobler cultures.

Such views were not delivered in any systematic way, but rather crept in and out of my students’ questions and conversation throughout the evening as they gave voice to their revulsion at what America offered them for their future and their present daily

life.

We were sitting on the patio under a black, moonless sky, our faces lit by the flickering light of a few candles in the center of a large stone table. We all had iced drinks in our hands or in front of us. His interruption took the form of very slowly putting down the glass that was in his hand—so slowly and quietly, and with such a measured, even movement that at first it seemed like some kind of ritual gesture. Everyone suddenly became quiet and looked at him, waiting. I remember listening for a long time to the waves of the bay and watching the lights of San Francisco across the water. The wind was shifting and turning cool. People were putting their collars up and hugging themselves, but no one dared get up. Foghorns were answering each other like far-off, unseen sea creatures.

Just as slowly and evenly, he angled his long, lean body back in his chair and gazed at nothing in particular. Then he turned his head as though it were a gun turret and looked directly at the husky, bearded young man who had just been speaking about the crimes of America. In the flickering candlelight, his bony face seemed wondrously alive and menacing at the same time. What he said to the young man—and of course to all of us present—was only this:

“You don’t know what you have here.” Then, after an uncomfortable pause, “You simply don’t know what you have.”

I doubt if anyone really understood what he meant. He was obviously speaking about America and telling us we did not appreciate what it was. But apart from that, we—in any case, I—could be sure of nothing else. Had this remarkable man of the spirit suddenly descended into ordinary patriotism or some kind of political partisanship? Certainly not. It was not only that such an attitude would have utterly contradicted what I knew of his views about the human condition and the inner causes of war and violence; more than that, it was the *way* he had just spoken—with the sense of presence and weight that he always reserved for ideas that referred to what is sacred within us, which transcends all distinctions of nation, class or race.

A few days later, talking to my students about what he had said, I thought of all the historical events he must have witnessed in his life. In the early part of the century he had lived and traveled widely throughout Asia and Europe, emigrating to the United States in 1944. His business had brought him into contact with many of the governments and leaders that shaped history between the First and the Second World Wars, and he had seen, from within, the forces at work in the play of nations. As a trained engineer, he also had an insider’s understanding of the power of modern science and technology. And as for his grasp of philosophical ideas, I frequently found myself shedding my professional “expertise” and bowing to his keen insight. In his presence, I often felt myself to be a “mere” American: raw, uneducated, awkward, naive—like a child. Yet that evening *he* was the American, “the last American,” freezing us with the unfathomably powerful statement:

“You don’t know what you have here.”

I. The Idea of America



ONE

OUR AMERICA

America was once the hope of the world.

But what kind of hope? More than the hope of material prosperity, although that was part of it; and more than the promise of equality and liberty, although that, too, was an important part of it. And more than safety and security, precious as these things are. The deeper hope of America was its vision of what humanity is and can become—individually and in community. It was through that vision that all the material and social promise of America took its fire and light and its voice that called to men and women within its own borders and throughout the world. America was once a great idea, and it is such ideas that move the world, that open the possibility of meaning in human life.

It has been said that any question can lead to truth if it is an aching question. For one person it may be the question of life after death, for another the problem of suffering, the causes of war and injustice. Or it may be something more personal and immediate—a profound ethical dilemma, a problem involving the whole direction of one's life. An aching question, a question that is not just a matter of curiosity or a fleeting burst of emotion, cannot be answered with old thought. Possessed by such a question, one is hungry for ideas of a very different order than the familiar categories that usually accompany us throughout our lives. One is both hungry and, at the same time, more discriminating, less susceptible to credulity and suggestibility. The intelligence of the heart begins to call to us in our sleep.

For many of us, such is now the question of the meaning of America. But it is also an elusive question. If we consider America only as a nation, that is, as a man-made construction, then it is hard to feel any ultimacy about the problem of America. Nations, as such, come and go: Persia, Rome, Byzantium have all sunk into the ocean of time. All the empires and national states of the past have come and gone in what seems like the twinkling of an eye, though in their time each appeared to itself and to the world as strong and real and enduring. And, of course, our era has witnessed the stunning disintegration of vast collectivities: the Third Reich, the Soviet Union, the political organization of Eastern Europe. Even the idea itself of "nation" may be disappearing or transmuting into what has been termed a "global web" of financial instrumentalities, electronic communication and advanced technological consumerism.

All my life I had been unable to understand or sympathize with people who seemed so passionately concerned about the preservation or enhancement of America. It had often seemed to me hypocrisy, a mask that covered the all-too-human fears for one's personal safety or comfort, sometimes mixed with the kind of self-righteousness that had turned me away from the religions of church and synagogue. But I was even more troubled by people who attacked America and who were always arguing about hidden conspiracies, intentional injustices that were built into "the system," and so forth. Why, I wondered, were they not just as concerned about the human condition itself?

And about their own incomprehensible mortal life on earth? They made me feel that I was selfish to have such questions burning in me.

And so, I was astonished and strangely joyous when I finally turned directly to studying the history of America and found almost everywhere that the men and women who carved out the ideals of America were driven by the same transcendent questions that had always been my own as well. I began to see that for many of these men and women America meant the struggle for conditions of life under which these ultimate questions could be freely pursued.

This glimpse of the motive of the Founders was at first very fleeting and insubstantial. Time and again this perception of mine was overwhelmed by the “authority” of the accepted views about everything pertaining to America. Historical knowledge and theory, political and economic opinions about the meaning of past and present events—the old as well as the latest views about America—covered over that glimpse into the origin of the American experiment. Even the accepted views about the religious motivations of the Founders clouded the issue—in fact, these commonly accepted views were the most distracting of all. They equated the religious impulses of our forefathers with the religion I knew from my own childhood, a religion that was simply dull and oppressive.

A NEW BEGINNING

America is the fact, the symbol and the promise of a new beginning. And in human life, in our lives as they are, this possibility is among the most sacred aspects of existence. All that is old and already formed can continue to live only if it allows within itself the conditions for a new beginning. Life itself is the mysterious, incomprehensible blending of the new and the old, of what already is and what is coming into being. The question of America is there: if America loses the meaning of its existence and if, in fact, America is now the dominant cultural influence in the world, then what will become of the world? The question of America leads all of us directly into the question of the purpose and destiny of human life itself in this era.

America and the Teachings of Wisdom

THE WORLD OF IDEAS AND THE DISEASE OF MATERIALISM

Our world, so we see and hear on all sides, is drowning in materialism, commercialism, consumerism. But the problem is not really there. What we ordinarily speak of as materialism is a result, not a cause. The root of materialism is a poverty of ideas about the inner and the outer world. Less and less does our contemporary culture have, or even seek, commerce with great ideas, and it is that lack that is weakening the human spirit. This is the essence of materialism. Materialism is a disease of the mind starved for ideas.

Throughout history ideas of a certain kind and nature have been disseminated into the life of humanity in order to help human beings understand and feel the possibility of the deep inner change that would enable them to serve the purpose for which they were created, namely, to act in the world as conscious, individual instruments of God, the ultimate principle of reality and value. Ideas of this kind are formulated in order to have a specific range of action on the human psyche: to touch the heart as well as the intellect; to shock us into questioning our present understanding; to point us to the greatness around us in nature and the universe, and the potential greatness slumbering within ourselves; to open our eyes to the real needs of our neighbor; to confront us with our own profound ignorance and our criminal fears and egoism; to show us that we are not here for ourselves alone, but as necessary particles of divine love.

These are the contours of the ancient wisdom, considered as ideas embodied in religious and philosophical doctrines, works of sacred art, literature and music and, in a very fundamental way, in indications of practical methods by which a man or woman can work, as it is said, to become what he or she really is. Without feeling the full range of such ideas, or sensing even a modest, but pure, trace of them, we are bound to turn for meaning to the lawfully existing instinctive impulses within ourselves toward physical pleasure (impulses which are meant to serve and not lead) and to the artificially induced illusions of what the ancient wisdom calls pride or the ego with its attendant fears, hatred and servility, as well as to the ego's exploitation of the intellect in the form of a swollen overestimation of disconnected logic and purely mental knowing. *This* is the root of materialism, the cultural neurosis of an era that believes that only the external senses show us the real world and that only physical or social comfort is worth striving for. Simply put, the neurosis of materialism leads us to despair. Despair because the impulse of hope, which is implanted in human nature as part of our unique consciousness, finds nothing in the world or in our concept of ourselves that carries the mark of indubitable, enduring truth and goodness, those two ultimate principles toward which that impulse of hope is meant to lead us.

But no idea exists alone. Great ideas are always part of a living system of ideas, all of which are necessary for the full understanding of any one of them. When we speak of the idea of America, we are speaking of many interconnected ethical ideas, both

metaphysical ideas that deal with ultimate reality, and ethical and social ideas, which *all together* offered hope to the world. The idea of America, with all that it contained within it about the moral law, nature, God and the human soul, once reflected to some extent the timeless, ancient wisdom that has guided human life since the dawn of history. America was a new and original expression, in the form of a social and political experiment, of ideas that have always been part of what may be called the great web of Truth. Explicitly and implicitly, the idea of America has resonated with this ancient, timeless wisdom and has allowed something of its power to touch the heart and mind of humanity. It is necessary to recover this resonance, this relationship, however tenuous and partial, between the teachings of wisdom and the idea of America.

What are these “teachings of wisdom”? The fact of the matter is that it is possible to discern a profound commonality at the heart and root of all the major religions and spiritual philosophies of the world. Differing in outer expression and emphasis, these age-old traditions are nourished by a single hidden current of interconnected ideas—like so many ancient trees of varied form and foliage watered by the same underground stream.

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Within this vast body of teachings about man in the universal world, several elements stand out as critical for our understanding of the idea of America. One of the most central of these elements is the idea of man as a being who exists between two worlds—an inner world of great spiritual vision and power, and an outer world of material realities and constraint. Both worlds call to us, and as long as we live, we are obliged to give each its due. Our task, our place in the scheme of creation, is to become conscious instruments of action on earth under the aegis of divine law and love. But, in order to fulfill this role, we must work to transcend the sense of self-identity that society thrusts upon us and that prevents us from recognizing our own inner self and its power to serve the good. In this ancient teaching, freedom is understood not as the license to obey one's desires but as obedient submission to a deep inner law; independence is understood as the discovery of one's own authentic self, which—although it may seem paradoxical—is also a mirror of the common cosmic Selfhood; equality is understood as every human being's right to seek the truth and to be allowed to give his or her light to the common welfare.

The idea of man's two natures, along with some of its ethical implications, was dramatically expressed in the teaching known as Stoicism, which flourished in the early Roman Empire and which served as inspiration to Washington, Adams, Jefferson and many other of the Founding Fathers of America.¹ The most politically powerful man of his time, the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, and one of the least powerful, the freed slave Epictetus, who was a mentor to the Emperor, both adhered to the Stoic philosophy. In this teaching, a human being is viewed as a being whose individual mind is meant to reflect and manifest the same all-universal and all-beneficent consciousness that creates and maintains the cosmos. At the same time, we are made to live for a finite time in a mortal body and are obliged by the true power of reason (which includes cosmic love) to care for our neighbor and to answer the moral requirements of family, society and culture—all of which are also part of the universal scheme. Although our inner nature is cosmic, our finite life is on earth; our duties are to both the immortal presence within and, while we live on earth, to our temporary role in the social order. Our task is simultaneous inner freedom and full outer engagement. In the words of Epictetus:

It is difficult [and necessary] to unite and combine these qualities—the diligence of a man who devotes himself to material things, and the constancy of one who disregards them [i.e., who is not attached to them]—yet not impossible. Otherwise, it would be impossible to be happy.²

And in the words of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, speaking of the need to accept the desires and sufferings attendant upon being obliged to live in a mortal body on earth and the simultaneous duty to act according to the dictates of one's own inner

God: “Nothing will happen to me which is not in conformity with the Nature of the All. [But] it depends on me to do nothing which is contrary to my god and my *daimon* [inner spirit].”³

THE INNER MEANING OF DEMOCRACY

As for the idea of democracy, the Founding Fathers—Washington, Jefferson, Franklin and others—never conceived of it solely as an external form of government. The meaning of democracy was always rooted in a vision of human nature as both fallen and perfectible—inwardly fallen and inwardly perfectible. To a significant extent, democracy in its specifically American form was created to allow men and women to seek their own higher principle within themselves. Without that inner meaning, democracy becomes, as Plato and Aristotle pointed out twenty-five hundred years ago, a celebration of disorder and superficiality.

All the rights guaranteed by the Constitution were based on a vision of human nature that calls us to be responsible beings—responsible to something within ourselves that is higher than the all-too-human desires for personal gain and satisfaction; higher than the dictates of the purely theoretical or logical mind; higher than instinctive loyalties to family and tribe.

This higher reality within the self was called many things—reason, conscience, Nature's God. When this idea is left out, or treated as though its meaning were obvious, then the ideals of independence and liberty lose their power and truth. They become mere names that mask the ever-present tendency of nations and groups and individuals to seek only their own external and short-term advantages.

Great ideas, ideas that meaningfully reflect something of the world's ancient tradition of wisdom, have the power to bind people together and to bring unity under a goal and a vision that are stronger and deeper than all personal, short-term gain. This is the mark of great ideas: they unify people and they also act to *unify the disparate parts of the human being*; they speak of a social order that is possible *on the basis of an ordering within the individual self*. The idea of America once had something of this power of unification.