

Jacob Needleman at the New School at Commonweal  
*A conversation with Steve Heilig*  
June 2, 2007

“Why Can’t We Be Good? Overcoming Obstacles to Our Higher Ideals”

**Steve Heilig:** Welcome to the New School. My name is Steve Heilig. I’m associated with Commonweal and with various healthcare institutions around the Bay Area here. I’m a medical ethicist and a book critic for the San Francisco Chronicle, and our guest today is Professor Jacob Needleman who is a professor of Philosophy at San Francisco State University and really a renowned author of a dozen books with broad themes that go deeply into some of the pressing issues of our day. So we’re very honored to have him here. His newest book, just out, is called *Why Can’t We Be Good?* Published by Tarcher - Penguin. And one of the things that’s most notable in his books to me, and I’ve actually reviewed a few of them for the Chronicle, is his ability to take deep ideas and make them accessible without diluting their complexity and also his mix of his own personal experiences and thoughts into his books. And I’d actually like to start by asking you, Jerry, and I’m going to call him Jerry because we are actually old friends—from your new book it’s obvious that you were drawn towards philosophical questions from the earliest age, in high school as you write in here and at Harvard and Yale and in universities in Europe, and I’m wondering if you had a particular issue, or a particular thought, or a specialty in philosophy that you started out with before you started writing these broader books.

**Jacob Needleman:** Yes. I was... I don’t know if there’s a gene for philosophy, but if there is I’m sure I had one. Because even way when I was a little boy I was sitting out on the stone steps looking up at the stars and asking my father about God and that sort of thing. I think a lot of young people have that. And it’s hard to pinpoint the issue that concerned me, but I started studying philosophy at college formally, but I had been reading it for years before that precociously, sort of, and really wanted to have some kind of response or answer to these unanswerable questions about life, death, immortality, God, good and evil, and I was a little disillusioned with my first philosophy classes at the university. They were all very dry and sterile and analytic and scientific. And so I got interested deeply in philosophy that had blood and juice in it, and existentialism was the one that I turned to very early on before I came to California. And I wasn’t very much interested in religion, because what I saw as religion, I became very allergic to in a way, and ran away from it, and only after I got to California and started teaching courses in religion, which I was obliged to do, did I really realize I had never really seen what the depths of meaning in religious teachings was. And then that became one of my primary interests, particularly when in California and San Francisco especially, all these new religious movements started springing up in the late ‘60’s.

**Steve Heilig:** And that was actually your first popular book, *The New Religions*, writing about that. You write in your new book that at one point you felt like you couldn’t throw

a brick out the window without hitting a guru. And I would add that some of them probably deserved that, but then you've gone on to write books like *The Way of the Physician*, *Lost Christianity*, *The Wisdom of Love*, *Time and the Soul*, *Money and the Meaning of Life*. And so it's money, love, time, medicine, and then a book about America itself—and these big topics—and your new one, which is basically about the age-old question of evil, and nature versus nurture, and many things like that. How do you decide when you're getting an idea for a book, how do you pick these topics and how to address them as you go along?

**Jacob Needleman:** Well, I've been trying from almost from the very beginning when I started studying the spiritual traditions in graduate school and in California, Buddhism and then finally Christianity and Judaism, and I started a very deep study of religious traditions—what are the ideas of all the great spiritual traditions of the world. And I realized there was a single unitary vision, and my aim in writing as it was in my life was to try to see if there was a bridge to where the ancient values and ideas about the human being and the universe could throw light on actual contemporary concrete problems of our culture and our personal lives. To try to see if there could be a bridge between the two—a light that could be thrown on our modern contemporary issues. And so, from the very beginning I started writing about the problems or the situations of our culture, in religion and education, in medicine, in our relationship to money, to love, to relationships with others, and more recently the problem we all have with time—how none of us have any time any more—and then the meaning of America. All these problems of our culture—my question has been can the great spiritual traditions, as I've come to understand them, really throw some light on these issues.

**Steve Heilig:** And that's very much a part of your latest book, which in some way, when I read it I saw it as, I won't call it a summation, but the theme that you're addressing underlies a lot of what you've written before in addressing those other issues, and as I read it it's basically, as I mentioned, the problem of evil as it's been addressed by philosophers and religion through the years, and the issue of who are we really and why, although so many of us know these higher ideals and feel them innately, why don't we... why are we not able to act on them so well, so I'm not sure if I'm stating that right, but if you would like to, would you state the new book's thesis and then we can talk about how you address it.

**Jacob Needleman:** Well, yeah. I think you see it quite rightly. But I feel it very much as kind of a culminating book of mine, though I do hope I have some time to write a few more, but yeah, I do think so. It's the question of questions, really, and we see it in the problem of the degradation of our ethical life in our culture. And what it means to be a real... a good human being. And why we can, although as I say in the book, the problem is although the title is maybe a little bit lighter than the book, why is it that although in some sense we do know what we ought to do, we do know what is good and just, why is it that we so often and so easily, almost all of us, betray our ideals. And act in accordance, or not, in opposition to the things we believe to be good, so really the fundamental question of who are we and what are we meant to be and how can we go from what we are in fact to what we are in possibility and what we are meant to be and

what will truly make us human. So this book and this topic, to my mind, underlies everything I have written and I try to go into it in my own experience as you say as much as possible.

**Steve Heilig:** And you say in your book, actually you quote Socrates—I would say if there were two philosophical voices in here that I know they are long time favorites of yours, it's Socrates and Marcus Aurelius, and you quote Socrates as saying that no man does evil intentionally, and I'm wondering if you can say something more about, you know, the thesis is that we know what is good and what is right and we have an innate sense of ethics, and where do you think that comes from?

**Jacob Needleman:** Well, I know it's not popular to say this, but I think there's two things—there's an inborn faculty... there's an inborn... we are not.... You see, the modern view of human nature, mostly, in the sort of intellectual circles of our culture, is that we're sort of complex animals with a computer of some kind on the top of our neck, and we've evolved in some blind, mechanical process from a primitive animal life to what human beings are, and all morality is more or less relative, or in any case socially conditioned into us. And I think that's a completely false picture of human nature, of human life, that we're born with a capacity to feel and know what is right and what is good and values are not that relative down at the heart of all our lives. And this is what we call conscience. And it's born in us, as it were, and it's part of our nature as much as anything else is, maybe even the most essential part of human nature that is inborn, and it's covered over as we grow older, and some kind of influence from society supports the development of conscience and other kind covers it over. And I think by the time we get to be more or less grown up the voice of conscience is pretty much covered over and only breaks through under tremendous emergencies and betrayals that we ourselves do and when we hear that voice of conscience so rarely, but it's so powerful that it's unmistakable. And so, I think the confusion of what a human being is has been totally perverted and the other side of it, the other extreme, is also completely wrong, in my opinion, the kind of literal, fundamentalist view that we are put down on earth is one truth, and we are obliged to believe everything literally that the bible says, and things of that kind—I don't think that is it ... I know what's true and I'm going to make you believe what I believe, and I think it's much subtler, much more interesting, more complex than that. We are born with the capacity to be truly good we need to work in order to open ourselves back up to that feeling of, that relationship to conscience. It's much more complicated than.... But in any case I think it's very toxic idea for our young people and for ourselves to think that there's no fundamental moral nature within ourselves and it's all socially contingent.

**Steve Heilig:** And you say and you give some illustrations of, like you say, it breaks through in emergencies of a spiritual or other kind, but you talk more in the beginning of your book about how to consciously try to uncover this innate sense of good that then gets buried as we grow up. How do people do that? Study? Meditation?

**Jacob Needleman:** That's right. This is a question I'm addressing, and just to get back for a minute to Socrates, Socrates says everyone, no one does evil intentionally, but to

really know what's good, people *think* they know what's good, that's what that means, it doesn't mean they actually *know* it, but for Socrates to really know means you know it in your life, in your mind, and in your heart and in the tissues of your body when you really know something, you can act upon it. Now the question of this book, particularly the early part, is how do we find our own bridge between what is down deep we know is to be good, and how we actually behave, and I was trying to find that bridge in my thought—where, where and all, because if we could all come to a good agreement talking with each other and discussing it and thinking and writing essays and... but when we actually go out into the street and meet with difficulties or even minor irritations, suddenly we betray our values. We think we should love better, and I found the bridge actually was a great discovery for me—I found it in my classroom—I had no idea that I was right in front of a kind of practical step that we can all take to becoming, actually, the moral beings we would wish to be—and that bridge was in my classroom with the work of listening to another person—that listening becomes a deeply moral action. And this is something we can all practice—and I discovered that working with my students and working with them working with each other, that there is an actual spiritual discipline and work of listening to another person, particularly when they disagree with us, and that requires that we step back from our own ego, from our own opinions, and let the other person in, not to agree with them, or disagree, but simply to let their thought into my own mind, and when I step back from myself in that way, I begin to be a much more moral person. There's a relation that establishes with another human being which is a definite, concrete step toward really caring for another person. It doesn't last, perhaps, the moment we get out into the street, maybe it's no longer there, but it's a step, and I have never seen ANY kind of practical steps that I could believe in, and I was astonished and very excited to see that there is this possibility in our own human relationships as a beginning step, if you see what I mean.

**Steve Heilig:** Yeah, and you have some, in the book there are some great stories of some of the episodes in your classrooms at various levels of teaching teenagers up to graduate school. I am wondering, and I had thought before I even got to the point, I was thinking about the infamous or famous Milgram Study which was demonstrated and has been used many times as demonstrating people's ability to do harm to others under what I guess you could call peer pressure in an institutionalized setting, and this was done back in what was it 1961 ... 65? Anyway, early sixties. So, would you recount some of that—the experience of showing the film made of that infamous study, and how your students reacted and learned from it?

**Steve Heilig:** Yeah. Suddenly that film, the experiment, has become very much in the public eye again because of the Abu Ghraib situation and Phil Zimbardo has written a very interesting book about experiments in that line, but the original experiment was briefly to put a very ordinary human being in a situation where he was administering shocks of ever increasing intensity to a subject in another room in a form of a test of memory, one question after another, and the person in the room was strapped down with electrodes and the person sitting at the table was administering these shocks, and the man in the room with the electrodes strapped to him made a wrong answer he would be given a shock one after another in increasing intensity and this man had presented himself as

someone who had a weak heart, etc. So the ordinary guy pressing the switches was presumably shocking this poor man who started screaming, “Let me out! Let me out! I have a bad heart!” etcetera, and he kept looking at the experimenter to say this man is suffering and the experimenter said you must go on. The experiment requires you must go on, and he had a white coat on, a lab coat, and all kinds of authority, and the poor fellow pressing the switches kept obeying the lab guy until the person in the booth was slumping and screaming and finally silenced and maybe had a heart attack and this guy, poor guy, at the switches kept turning the switches higher and higher. It was shocking in two or three senses of the term. The students and I and everyone who sees this film just can’t believe it’s happening. And it turns out it happened a lot, to a lot of people who were given... and of course it was a setup. The guy in the booth was not really getting shocked—he was part of the experiment, but the man administering the shocks could not accept what he was doing, could not see what he was doing, although he did seem to, but he just obeyed the authority even to the point where he was possibly killing another human being, and this film shows... this experiment shows, and this film shows with incredible clarity how it’s possible how much we block off our own manifestations so we don’t really see... we don’t really see deeply how we betray our morality. We always justify ourselves in some way or other, and the work of trying to see ourselves betraying our morality is the principal method, principal means by which we can become truly moral. As long as we falsely believe we’re OK more or less, we had good reasons to do this or that thing, or we don’t even realize what we’ve done, then there’s no hope. We’re going to just behave in this immoral way, so what that experiment shows, and I’m not sure that was the intent of the experiment, because... but which I show to my students and all are gasping in shock when they see it, how obvious it is that we cannot see how we really are. So this book begins with what I share with the students, but it ends toward that direction—the need to try to obey the moral that we know is right but to suffer the fact and see consciously that we do not obey it. That is the kind of fire that enables us to awaken to what we are meant to be. Is that clear what I said? I don’t know.

**Steve Heilig:** Philip Zimbardo is a psychologist at Stanford, and his, it’s fascinating really the timing of it, because his new book is called *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*, and he was even an expert witness on the Abu Ghraib trials. And his, it’s very complimentary, I’d say, to yours in a way because his is to say that there’s no bad apple but a bad barrel, basically. What does an individual do in isolation in themselves to cultivate or recultivate this sense of good again?

**Jacob Needleman:** Well, I think it begins with finding companions who have the same question. I do think we can do much all by ourselves, but I think there are many people out there who wish to go into this question together, and I think that is the start. When you really get people together and then they begin to work at listening to each other and find ideas, in maybe books, that really touched them down deep, because there are books that really touch our moral sense too—I’m not speaking of the Bible or anything particularly, but great books of philosophy, great novels, and great art and then find men and women coming together trying to look into these questions more deeply and converse in a way that is much more open to each other. That would be the beginning, and that very often will attract help that may come from people who really do understand —there

are people out there who can help us. In fact, they're probably looking for us more than we're looking for them. So, that may sound mystical, but I think it's true. I think the first thing is to find people who you can really listen to and work with on this kind of thing. That's where I would start. The same question was asked me with the book on America, by the way, and I think the two go hand in hand there. Can I say something about that?

**Steve Heilig:** Yes, we all come back to that, too.

**Jacob Needleman:** Because the question of the book was the meaning of America, really, and I did discover, I think, that beyond the deepest meaning of America with all its might and power and great constitution and everything is that it makes it possible for people to come together and work at discovering their own individual conscience, their own individual moral nature, and that to me is the whole reason for the founding, ultimately for the founding and creation, of America. And the greatest of our founding fathers understood that—that what was needed was a safe place to search for conscience. And, yes, it was an economic and political issue, and military issues came up, but it was all there to protect the individual human being coming together with others to search for some contact with their higher nature, which I'm calling conscience in this book.

**Steve Heilig:** Something of a different twist on the concept of it takes a village to nurture the best in people. In your new book you mention again that sometimes it takes very unusual or extreme circumstances to remind us of our best nature and if you're willing I wonder if you might retell something of the story about your own mother falling ill and then dying here in San Francisco while she was with you and how you... what you felt after that.

**Jacob Needleman:** That might not be possible for me to do over the phone in an interview, but I can say generally that when things like that happen—when one's deepest, closest people die, or when one... one behaves in a ... one then has a moment sometimes, or more than a moment to see how one has actually behaved toward that person, whether it's a mother or a father or a brother or a sister or somebody close, or it can be coming under many other conditions too, or in a war or times of great stress or under situations which we just described of experiment, when one sees—it is brought home to one that one has betrayed something of infinite value in oneself, and in one's relation to the other, a kind of remorse sets in and that power of remorse is the transforming fire—when one's mother dies or father dies, etcetera, very often there's a deep silence and a deep sense of a remorse—might be called a remorse of conscience, it's not the same thing as guilt, it's simply a humble awareness that one has betrayed what is truly valuable, and it's unmistakable, and totally compelling, and it's not like saying gee, I should have done different. That comes later. That's maybe sometimes guilt appears, and then you flog yourself, you suffer, and maybe sometimes it becomes very neurotic and frightening, but this is a deep sense of your failure to be what you are, and that sense of remorse actually is a huge moral force at least for the time that it's present it makes you into the being you wish to be. If a person has some contact with that feeling of the remorse of conscience, they can not betray their values. It's just not possible. You become what you are, and that's the price we have to pay as human beings. Now this is an idea that I didn't invent,

but I simply rediscovered parts of it when my mother died. And other cases of my life, and we'll find it in our own great, and in the heart of, all the great spiritual traditions we were brought up with, even though it's been all covered over sometimes in the churches and synagogues, and political changes that are taking place in religion they're serving. And the superficiality that's come, you know, out of religions. But you'll find it at the really deep spiritual mystical heart if you like of Christianity and Judaism and I presume of Islam and also in Buddhism, it's really at the heart of everything deep. The confrontation that is so deep that it silences all our conditioned reflexes and we become what we are meant to be, and I think ... I don't think that we can create, we can invent those situations, but we can be more sensitive to them and just look back in our own life to when we've experienced those things, that would be another big step toward becoming moral.

**Steve Heilig:** And you mentioned in the book as well that in your view a lot of the freedoms we have won in the modern era from various dogmas and freedom of speech, etc. etc., have then, while those freedoms are valuable, they leave open the question of freedom to do what? To be who, and you know it's left many people with a sense of emptiness as well.

**Jacob Needleman:** Yeah, it's true. It's really ironic because it's such a great value to be free from tyrannical oppressive governments, for example, to be free from restrictions on what we can say and even some large number of restrictions on what we can do, sexually and all other kinds of ways, but for some reason it hasn't really made us happier, really, on the contrary, it's kind of despair having relativism and subjectivism and a kind of shallow individualism, which is very toxic and our young people grow up without any sense of thinking to have to choose between a kind of shallow relativism and a tyrannical fundamentalism, both of which are two sides of one bad coin. And so the question of, and I tried to put it in the book, too, is freedom from is very good if you know what you have freedom for. And we're pretty much lacking the "freedom for" part in our culture. It's very.... But in my opinion the "freedom for" is the freedom to become a moral person, open to the deepest spiritual teachings coming from within ourselves from our own conscience. Here's my point—putting it another way—I have the view, and I try to show and argue it in this book, that the human being was not made for pleasure, was not made to gratify the ego, was not made to make money, was not made to have babies—it was made to serve something bigger than oneself. We are built to serve. And the only happiness we're ever going to get is when we begin to serve something that is bigger and better than just our own individual ego. And that might be all kinds of good causes; ultimately it comes to serve something higher than ourselves from which we descended and to which we belong. Now, how we find that is going to be up to us and working with each other, but my point, and I try to show it in the book—we're only really happy when we are giving, not when we are getting. We have a pleasure when we get, and it's good to get, but for what? For what? What I'm trying to say is we get, we take, and it's good only to the extent that it enables us to give. Now that may sound sort of moralistic and all that, but I believe it is the deepest truth of our human nature.

**Steve Heilig:** And you do in the book explore the idea of what is a common thread of ... of a code or a moral message which basically you focus first on the Torah, but you say that many other teachings are just as valid, and it seems to come down to some variation on what's been called the golden rule, right?

**Jacob Needleman:** Yes. That's it. And in the Torah, in the Old Testament, of course, that's the fundamental thread of the whole of the Hebrew tradition which has been passed on in its way to the Christian and the Islamic traditions—it's defined the whole western culture—it's the essence of Judaism is ethics, is love of one's neighbor, care for one's neighbor. Love of God as through caring for one's neighbor and you'll find it equally in the Eastern traditions—it just needs to be translated still. But I start as you know I start the book with this, I found, very charming little story in the Talmud, which is from my own tradition, of course, about the rabbi who was a spiritual teacher, Hillel, who—may I tell that brief story? This is how the book begins with this story of Hillel who was a great rabbinic teacher who lived around the time just before around the time of Jesus. A young man comes to him and says, rather defiantly, I will become a believer in Judaism if you will tell me what the essence of the Torah is while I am standing on one foot, and Hillel very quickly, simply, gently replies with one version of the golden rule, which is that which is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor, that is the whole Torah. All the rest is commentary. And then he says to the man, now go study. And to me that defines the whole point of what we are meant to be. And it's because that golden rule has been cheapened and its expression has been mocked and it's been looked to be impossible, and it sounds unrealistic, but down deep it's the essence of the whole moral law that the Jewish tradition has given to the world and which the rest of the world, our culture, has fundamentally been based on. So, we could say a lot more about that, but in a way this book enabled me to rediscover a lot about my own Jewish tradition which I ran away from very fast when I was a young kid.

**Steve Heilig:** A common scenario, right? I would like to ask you about, I know one of your favorite writers and teachers is Marcus Aurelius, and his Meditations, and I think what's fascinating about him to me, I mean, on many levels, was here was, as you mention in your book the most powerful man on earth at that time, the Emperor, and he would sit and go deeply into philosophical questions and he was maybe, what you know... the closest to a philosopher king that's ever existed, and the quotes you pick from him is he asking himself actually to “stop letting the guiding principle within you to be tugged around like a marionette by the strings of selfish impulses.” And it's just striking when I think of politics through the years and leaders how few such leaders we've really had. And being a ... he was very much involved in warfare, as you know part of survival really there, for his own nation state, but do you think it's possible in our current years for the way the system, the political system, and the world is for us to have somebody on his level in this time?

**Jacob Needleman:** Oh, I think it is. The people question is very hard in one sense because to be a world leader requires all kinds of games and all kinds of compromises and all kinds of, I don't know, ethical compromises, etcetera too, but I think such a human being could exist and could come into power. But you understand, yes, that

Marcus was there in the greatest power on earth at that time was Rome, he was the emperor, he was sitting in his tent while there was a military campaign against the Barbarians in the swamps of Eastern Europe there, and he was trying to.... And philosophy in the ancient world was not an intellectual discipline it was only that it was not an academic discipline, it was a way of living and to call yourself a philosopher in that era was to live what your were speaking – to live a good life, a wise life, a caring and just life, and one of Marcus’ disciplines ... his exercises... what he was practicing in this book of his called *Meditations*, is really a collection of his own exercises that he was trying every day of his life and one was to try to not be pulled around by those puppet strings, not to simply listen to his own immediate reactions and desires and opinions, but to step back from his emotional reactions to everything and try to listen within to a voice of what we would call now the intelligence in the heart of the universe itself, what was called logos, or the world ... the mind of the world, it was like Socrates in that respect. And he tried to listen to that mind and he saw that he failed again and again, and so the honesty of this great powerful man and the clarity of what he was trying is breathtaking. Now, I tried an exercise with my students, and this is really important to my mind, when we were studying Marcus Aurelius and I asked them to just try to for a day or two to when they were annoyed with something to step back and try to just observe themselves being annoyed and not try to become better or worse or change it or anything but just to observe it, well to make a long story short almost all of them forgot to do it, but the one person that really tried was a young woman who got very upset between the days of the classes when she went to the dry cleaner and her cleaning wasn’t ready, her clothing wasn’t ready when it was supposed to be, and this gentle little young woman got furious as most of us would with the person behind the counter, but suddenly she remembered, oh, this is what professor Needleman was talking about. Here I am. I’m annoyed. I am annoyed at this person and she said suddenly I was like two people – I was somebody who was angry, and I was also someone who was just watching very calmly watching myself, and eventually my anger became much softer and I was able to leave with a good word to the other person. What she said then was the thing that stunned me, what she had experienced was that with her mind she could step back from herself and just be aware of herself, and just watch, and she said to me, said to the whole class I had no idea my mind could do that. I was stunned, because this is such a fundamental property of a human being, to be able to separate from one’s own emotions and opinions and reactions and I was thinking, are we raising a culture where people do not know this capacity as a human being to separate from themselves and just become free for a moment and become connected perhaps to some other capacity, which is the source of morality. We cannot be moral people while we are completely swallowed by our egoistic emotions like anger.

**Steve Heilig:** Well you mentioned, only really in passing, in the book Buddhism and teaching along those lines, but those parts that you’re saying now and you talk about later in the book very much rang true to me in those traditions of really one of the aims of meditation to be able to train your mind to step back from being tugged around by just the whirlwinds of your emotions and reactions.

**Jacob Needleman:** Yes, it’s very much Buddhism, and that stepping back itself is a moral force. It’s not stepping back in order to get rid of your bad parts, and that’s what it

becomes sometimes when a religion becomes too moralistic, but the actual stepping back itself is a moral force. It's very much Buddhism in many of its forms, but I think if we know how to really look, it's in each and every great tradition ... but Buddhism has been able to state it in a way that is meaningful to many people now.

**Steve Heilig:** I want to come back to the book previous to this one again, *The American Soul*, was published in 2001 actually and when I spoke to you then you were just finishing it when September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 happened. And I had asked you if you had felt you had to change the book related to that... the kind of chaotic reaction about what is America all about and the rest of the world, and you said no, basically all the ideas you had in there, the fundamental founding principles of America still held true. So now we're almost six years on, and I'm wondering if you look back at what you were writing then and what you thought about in terms of what is the essence of America if you have more reflections about that.

**Jacob Needleman:** Well, it's still true. We're still able to find our way to come together to reason together, to converse as free citizens. It's still possible. The space still exists. It may be getting crowded a little bit around the edges, a little bit narrower around the edges, with certain... the Patriot Act and things of that kind that people are sort of finding difficult, but we're still America... we're very endangered at this point. But there's a sense in which one feels that it's beginning to change ... the tide is beginning to change a little bit, that we're beginning to know what we stand for, we're beginning to know that we have the power to make a change in our government when we feel it's wrong, we have the ability to hear and listen to each other. I think it's still America. It's still possible. And as long as that possibility remains maybe we will continue to exist, but if it gets too crowded out with fear, and greed, then we'll no longer be America, we'll just be the United States, and then that will be a powerful country which will not last too long.

**Steve Heilig:** Would I be stretching it too much ... I was struck in reading your new book and thinking back on *The American Soul*, the previous one, that, I mean the very ... there's a thread between them if *The American Soul* could be seen as one that is kind of the national level of this, it's basically uncovering what is good that gets buried up. How do we hold to the very, really, lofty but fundamental values that the Founding Fathers had? And as you mentioned in that previous book, we've been through a couple of horrible wounds, the Civil War was one of yours, slavery, in particular, and the decimation genocide of the Native Americans were really basic wounds that the country has had to live with and move forward from and deal with even to this day, and so, I mean, how does, I mean, it's a political system, but the nation as you mention is struggling with fear and greed and these past wounds as well.

**Jacob Needleman:** Well, we are. We're struggling with a culture, which I mean... I haven't read Al Gore's new book, but the title is compelling. I may be misinterpreting it but we're a culture with the use of reason in a deep sense of ... a warm sense, not a cold and icy sense... where we haven't been... we're chipping at .... I think, let me put it another way.... There's a lot of toxic ideas in our society now that we are bringing into the culture, into young people's minds and I think there's too much of a reliance on

television, on entertainment, on sound bites, on computerized living, on electronic communication, and not enough of sitting down with real flesh and blood human beings and thinking together and reasoning together, and opening our hearts and minds to a question together, that's the heart of democracy. And I think our young people are not being shown enough what it means to sit down and talk and reason, and converse about ... because no one human being has the answers to our problems, but together the intelligence of the group can begin to appear. And the war that we're fighting, whatever it's cause is, is not ... is a war of ideas. We have to rediscover the great ideas that touched us as Americans and that is where it all has to begin in my opinion. I don't think it comes with big political movements. They are necessary on one level, but ideas that touch the part of the human being which loves truth and loves the good—that's what we need. That sounds maybe too unrealistic, but it's absolutely necessary. I was teaching Emerson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who is our greatest American philosopher, maybe our greatest American writer, I was worried about my students because I was afraid that they would not respond to the beautiful but somewhat old-fashioned language of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and they loved him. They loved it. And I asked them why... of course it had to do a lot with the way the course was taught, but they said reading Emerson gave us hope. And the hope was not so much in the content of Emerson's philosophy, or rather it was not so much the content of what he said, it was the part of themselves that they touched when they heard these ideas, and that is the heart, the moral core of a human being can be touched by great ideas. So if we have enough people begin to connect with each other in that way, I think that can be a tremendous force for good in the country. We don't really think very well ... I don't mean we don't think... scientifically we are very smart... with engineering, with technology, with some kind of scientific things, but we don't think philosophically very well in a human sense, not in an academic sense, but when that kind of ... those questions are opened up for people, they're like hungry. People were yearning for great ideas, were yearning to ponder these questions, people are starving for this sort of thing. Young people, too. I was just teaching, working at a high school here in the Bay Area to try to bring ethics into the curriculum more, and these kids—high school kids—are just starving for great ideas. And maybe I sound a little prejudiced because I'm a philosophy professor or something, but I really think this kind of thing is at the heart of what it means to be a human being, and to be a moral human being, and that's what America was meant for.

**Steve Heilig:** Could you just as a footnote here or a reference could you say what essay or works of Emerson you were most commonly reading?

**Jacob Needleman:** Well, you could just take a dart and throw it into Emerson, not a brick, but I would say, I always start with *The Oversoul*, which is Emerson's sort of signature essay, as we say these days. And then read *Self Reliance*, and then what's called *The American Scholar*, which is a great essay, and the Harvard Divinity School lecture, and I would say also *Compensation*, the essay called *Compensation*, and then the essay called *Experience*.

**Steve Heilig:** You conclude your book, actually, I really enjoyed and found you know heartening, as you say, some of the stories from the classroom, and at the end you're

talking to very young, to fourteen—fifteen year old high school age. And as you mention it I loved the term you used, talking to these you saw young people only just coming into the chaos of human life in the world, and then they would ask you questions, and you had a young woman who asked you, and this is one of the themes of these interviews in terms of ecological ideas, she just spoke up out of the blue, and said, “Why are we destroying the earth?” And so how did you, can you talk a little bit about how the discussion that you had then in response to that question?

**Jacob Needleman:** Well, I started thinking yes what am I going to do with these little kids, well, for me, they were little kids, some of them came up to my waist practically, but they turned out to be as deep and ethical an audience as I’ve seen, and then somebody called out, “why are we destroying the earth,” and we went into that question and about people maybe really trying and we have to understand that we know what we have to do, we really know what is right here, and maybe these people who, the heads of big corporations and everybody is saying are responsible, maybe they also have a part of themselves knows what is right and knows what is good, and how can we understand the problem without understanding what human beings are, and not so much blaming them and thinking we would do better if I were president of Exxon, I would certainly be doing better things and I wouldn’t be so greedy. We just need to understand what human beings are, that maybe they have a conscience too that has to break through. In any case, the point was not the answer; the point was the process of ethical reflection that is not agitated, and not ready to put down the person we disagree with, but a need to understand. And these kids, they are *deeply* interested in that sort of thing. They’re *ready* to think and deeply from the heart. That’s what touched me about it, and so by the end of that class I just felt there was so much hope in the young people. So the book ends for me on this hopeful note that there are these young people, and also there are these young people inside of us, who are hungry for great thought. I don’t know if I’ve summarized my book very well there, but that’s where it ends.

**Steve Heilig:** Well I thought it was fascinating on your own personal level, I mean you were coming back to teaching children who were the same age that you started in these ideas yourself, so you probably, I’m wondering if you, you know, you see something of yourself in them.

**Jacob Needleman:** Well, maybe that’s right, you know, I hadn’t really thought of that. But yes, of course, there I was that little boy in the first row, just interrupting me. “Why do people get angry?” he said. What a great question. It stumped me. And what we need is to be stumped together.

**Steve Heilig:** And you mentioned the need for action as well. I think the famous quote from I think it was Edmund Burke who said, “All is necessary for evil to triumph is that good men do nothing.”

**Jacob Needleman:** Well yes, that’s true—action. But action without truth is not so much a good thing. But action with truth is completely what we need. Absolutely. It is so. We can’t forget the truth part. And the truth part isn’t just what I believe. It’s what we

understand together. And I think Burke would have agreed that's what makes America something special is that people are free to think together. But if they're free just to shout at each other, then it's no longer of much use. I don't think this is a matter of ... of course we have to act, but between what we know and action there is this other intermediate step, which is to *think together* about who and what we are. That being left out ... I really believe there's an intermediate step between thinking in an isolated way about what's good and bad, and then acting out there in the world, because the tragic truth is that most causes start very, very nobly, and very soon they attract lots of people and very soon they become factions and people don't listen to each other. People start hating each other and they all believe we should do the right thing but if you don't do it my way I'm going to kill you. And then it becomes the same old story. So, the revolutions start, but then they never go past the first difficulty and that difficulty comes when people can't hear each other. I mean, how many good causes have there been that have come to nothing, and even made things worse. And I think that there's danger for the environmental movement as well. It's become a big movement and are people listening to each other the way they wish to be listened to by others? I don't know.

**Steve Heilig:** But you sounded like in something you said previously here was that you have now some sense of optimism about, perhaps more than five years ago about the nation as a whole and certain....

**Jacob Needleman:** I think so. I think we're ... I'm very, very encouraged by things now that are happening and books that are appearing... I haven't read it, but this latest book of Paul Hawken looks very interesting, about, what is the title of it, *Blessed Unrest*, or something like that, that there really is a movement stirring, but will it get past the point of if it... will people be able to be open to each other... open to let each other in when they disagree with them, when people disagree, or when they seem to be not accepting what you want or your way of doing it, that doesn't happen, if people can't state it, and that's gonna take, that's where the hard work will be in the revolution that's coming. But I think the revolution is ready to happen, people are ready to try to change the government in another way to try to protect the earth, but will they be able to do it as a group or a community of love and care, not so much sentimental love, but to care for each other as much as they wish us all to care for the earth.

**Steve Heilig:** Thank you very much. We're up here at the end of our time, and I've had a ... as I think people can tell... any one of Dr. Needleman's books go into so many deep topics that you can spend hours on any of these and his students in his classes through the years have been very fortunate, and I feel fortunate to be able to talk to you here again today, and thank you very much for spending time with us and the new book is *Why Can't We Be Good*, published by Tarcher-Penguin. So, thank you very much.

**Jacob Needleman:** Thank you. It is a great pleasure talking to you.