

The Great Unknown Is Me, Myself: A Conversation with Jacob Needleman by Richard Whittaker

Jacob Needleman's voice has been prominent in the conversation about man's inner possibilities for some forty years. Turning away from a career in medicine toward philosophy while at Harvard, he went on to Yale, and then moved west when a position opened up at San Francisco State University. While teaching there, he found himself more and more drawn toward man's perennial questions. Making a decision not to confine himself to academic writing, he chose to share his own meditations with a broader audience. His book *The New Religions*, originally published in 1970, was a ground-breaking study of alternative spirituality in America. Many influential volumes followed, including *A Sense of the Cosmos*, *The Heart of Philosophy*, *Money and the Meaning of Life*, *The American Soul*, *What Is God?* and, to be published in September 2012, *An Unknown World: Notes on the Meaning of the Earth*. I met with Dr. Needleman at his home in Oakland, California, to approach the question of the unknown in an open-ended way.

—Richard Whittaker

RICHARD WHITTAKER: I thought that, since you're a teacher of philosophy, I could ask you to talk a little about the unknown in terms of the Western philosophical tradition.

JACOB NEEDLEMAN: I should start by saying, only half-jokingly, that philosophers don't do answers. We do questions. We deal with discovering and deepening our sense of something that is unknown. But in the spirit of your question and—as an academic thing, and in a good way—when I hear this phrase “the unknown” I think first of all of Immanuel Kant, probably the greatest modern philosopher. He defined something essential about the modern era in the Western world through an extraordinary book called *The Critique of Pure Reason*. This is a vast, complex work of genius; it's like walking into a great cathedral because of the immensity of it and the depth of thought and understanding in it. To put it briefly, he argued with unsurpassed persuasive power that the structure of the mind shapes our reality; that there are categories by which the mind operates and organizes the data that comes to us through our senses. It organizes all that data automatically beneath the level of consciousness so that by the time that we actually have a perception of that flower or that object, it has already been organized by the categories through which the mind works. All our experience is shaped by passing through these modifying functions. So we can never really know things as they are independent of our perception of them. He gave two roughly similar names to this unknown. One is “things-in-themselves” and the other word is the noumenon (meaning “that which can be apprehended only by a higher power of direct knowing, which in fact we do not have”). We're forever barred forever from knowing reality as it is in itself.. Whatever certainty about the world that we seem to have—such as the law of causality—is simply a certainty that the mind irresistibly imposes on our perception. He demonstrated this with such force and such genius, it astonished the whole intellectual world. For many people it was –and still is– a shattering realization to think that humanity is never going to know reality as it is. Some people fell into despair.

RW: I think of “the death of metaphysics” as being connected with Kant.

JN: Yes—metaphysics considered as the knowledge of reality independent of our perception, the universe as it really is. As Kant put it, metaphysics used to be the queen of the sciences and now it no longer has that status. He was trying to account for the fact that there is certainty. But it's only the certainty that we put into the world, not certainty about the world as it is in itself. So this had a huge influence on the modern era. Many people have argued with it, but nobody has ever really overcome the influence that this man has had.

RW: I'm not surprised you went directly to Kant. Let's go back to Descartes. If we can talk about the unknown, we can also talk a little about the known. And that brings us to Descartes who asked himself, "Is there anything I can know with real certainty?"

JN: Yes. What can I be certain of? It was an impulse of wishing to know the truth for oneself and not depending on belief. It was, in a way, the birth of the modern scientific era. So he decided to make an experiment. He would suspend belief in anything that he could possibly doubt. There were the things that any normal thinker might have some doubt about, and then things that always seem so believable that you never question them. But could one conceivably be mistaken—like is that flower really yellow? Or am I really sitting at this table? Conceivably I could be dreaming that I'm sitting at this table. Anything that could conceivably be not true he was going to bracket out, including even obvious mathematical statements, two and two is four. There could be some demon that's putting it in my mind that this is true. It sounds absurd, but it's conceivable. So it's the method of doubt. What he came to was that no matter what I doubt, it is experientially and logically undeniably certain that I am doubting it. Thus the famous formula: I think, therefore I am. So he established that certainty, to some a seemingly very thin piece of certainty, to be sure, but now for Descartes there was the experiential taste of certainty.

Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Socrates*, 1787

RW: In your new book *An Unknown World* you bring up how Descartes has fallen into disfavor. And yet there is something, you write, that's admirable about his search.

JN: I think there is. He's been demonized as being the chief culprit in practically every problem we face, especially the environmental crisis, alienating humanity from nature and divorcing the mind from matter. But, as a young person reading about his experiment of doubting everything, I remember this action of concentrating and withdrawing my attention (he calls it bracketing) from everything that I took for granted—what I perceived, what I believed, everything external and all ideas in my mind—and concentrating my attention in that way as a means of trying to know what I was certain of. And in the process, I realized I had a specific capability of the mind, a capacity to withdraw my own attention from everything outside of myself, outside of "I," toward myself. Now, I've been through a lot of exposure to great spiritual teachings, such as the sermons of Meister Eckhart, the Bhagavad Gita and many other sources. At a certain point, and in certain contexts, almost all of them speak of the work of withdrawing the attention away from what Eckhart calls "the agents of the soul," withdrawing the attention from what the senses bring you, from what thought brings you, thereby bringing yourself back into yourself. I felt a taste of that inner work with Descartes. It was very exciting to realize that I could doubt all this. It wasn't disillusioning at all. It was fantastically interesting! I could separate myself—in a very healthy way, I thought—from being taken, from being swallowed by thoughts, emotional images and the external world. That had a great influence on me. There was no sense of alienation from nature or the life around me—there was only a new sense of a mental, personal capacity I didn't know I had.

RW: That brings up the idea of self-inquiry and trying to understand my own experience in this inward way.

JN: I think so. I think Descartes has been demonized for this because he did make a radical distinction between mind and matter, these two fundamental realities that, he said, have nothing in common with each other. And this generated a whole paradox. How do mind and matter interact with each other - as they obviously do every time we intentionally move? And we still have that as a paradox.

RW: Yes from the point of view of his interior investigation, maybe there's a lot more in there that he didn't experience or find.

JN: Maybe. In any case, once Descartes had the experience of certainty, he goes back to logical and mathematical certainty. And as for that possible demon that could trick him into being wrong even about the certainty of logic and mathematics, Descartes turns to the idea of God that he has in his mind. And he asks, what about this idea of God? God is good. God is perfect. And God, a good God, would not allow man to be deceived like that. Therefore, logic and mathematics can be trusted. At this point, of course, many philosophers sharply criticize him, accusing him of smuggling in a cheap trick. But in fact, he says, where did this idea of God come from? That couldn't have come from this poor, fallible man. The fact that I have this idea of God is a kind of proof that God exists. In one sense, it does seem to be a piece of philosophical sleight-of-hand. On the other hand, if you look at it from the point of view of spiritual truth, it's really an indication that there is an objective duality in life, and that, in order to harmonize it, you need a higher force, which in the end means also that you need a higher state of consciousness.

RW: I think we could dwell on that, but there's one more question I want to ask relating to the Western philosophical tradition. Socrates is this basic, generative figure, thanks to Plato. So where did Socrates come from? Where did he get his knowledge? I know this can't really be answered, but it's still an interesting question, isn't it?

JN: We have to recognize about Socrates, first of all, that everything we know about him and his greatness is something that took place in the form of dialogue with other people. He was a master of showing people that they did not understand what they thought they understood. He was a master at taking away people's certainty, particularly as involved moral issues, but all kinds of certainties. This way of interrogating, person-to-person, was a fundamental aspect of Socrates, and Plato captured an aspect of it, but maybe he didn't capture the whole thing. Another Greek writer, Xenophon, also wrote about his encounters with Socrates and another aspect of the force of Socrates as a person, inquiring, listening.

RW: Socrates delivers people to the unknown, delivers them into question.

JN: Absolutely. And that's the liberation he brings. To really deepen a question puts you in touch with another part of yourself that your "answers" usually cover over; this is the freedom from the known, that Krishnamurti and others speak about. The great answer is also experienced as a question when a master delivers it to you. The known can be a slave driver. The other main thing about Socrates is that he was concerned that a man, a woman, a human being needs to know himself—above all needs to take care of what he called the soul, take care of the true self. The first aim anyone should have was what he called "tending the soul." Unless that's your main aim, everything else will lead you astray. Those two things are part of where I think this theme, "The Unknown," is leading. Take care of your true self, your true consciousness and divest yourself from the things you think you know, not only about the world, but about yourself. These two belong together.

RW: So this idea of knowing myself—what does that mean? Clearly, the implication is that

I don't know myself.

JN: The great unknown is me, myself. We can talk all we want about Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, and not knowing things in themselves, but this, myself, is the great unknown.

RW: Yes. And are there levels of the unknown? There are things that are metaphysically, irreducibly unknowable, perhaps—and then way over here is ordinary knowing. I know that's a chair over there and I know what you do with a chair. But is there a gray area between my ordinary knowing and not knowing? For example, I don't know where I put my glasses. And after awhile, all of a sudden, I remember. Or maybe there's a problem I don't know how to solve, but after awhile, it comes to me.

JN: What is the mind and its knowledge? This is certainly part of the fundamental question, who am I? What you say is so understandable, so ordinary—in a decent sense of the word—but behind this fundamental question of knowledge and the mind there's a hidden question, and this hidden question opens up a world. Down deep, the question that you're now speaking about is consciousness. We say, "knowing." I know that's a chair. I can touch it and so forth. But that doesn't satisfy us—because we have the wrong question. It has to do with consciousness. And it's a great unknown, this thing called consciousness. We don't know what consciousness is. That's stunning! I don't know what consciousness is, and yet I'm sure I am conscious! Isn't it so? The mind, the thoughts, the categories, the words about every kind of specifically human knowing and action—we're talking about consciousness. This is the hidden question. One of the great questions in philosophy is how do we know?—but this classic philosophical question is actually a question about consciousness. Consciousness is man. That's his unique possibility. So I think the whole idea of mind, knowledge, certainty, the unknown, has to do first and foremost with consciousness.

RW: That's beautiful. Sometimes it amazes me is that it's not recognized that everything in life exists, first of all, as experience. We seem to miss this leap we take from experience to "things that are out there." We just go out to them, without Descartes' questioning, as if all the stuff out there is the whole story. But sometimes, I'm in a kind of state where it shocks me that nobody seems to recognize that it's experience we really live in. Do you follow what I'm getting at?

JN: It's astonishing that this is not at the forefront of our awareness, let's say, that I am experiencing this. The "I-ness" is lost in my life. I could go through a whole month, year, a whole lifetime and not realize that I am experiencing life. Consciousness is myself in some deep sense of the word. I'm not my arms and legs, my nose, my opinions. I'm not my words, my thoughts, my sensations. I'm not my organs. I'm a human being. A human being is defined by consciousness. That's what you're saying, if I understand it.

RW: Yes. I read this interview with John O'Donohue and a sentence stood out to me. He said, "I feel that there is an evacuation of interiority going on in our times." I think this is very much related.

JN: I think I understand what he means. We start explaining things through the brain that are really things of the mind and then think that we've understood interiority. This is externalizing the interiority that defines a human being. In neuroscience now it's a big thing, almost fashionable, that neuroscience can begin to see many things inside the brain. It's remarkable, but they still haven't explained what they call "the hard problem." The hard problem is the experience of consciousness. You can say all you want about the cells charging and discharging and all that, but how do you account for the experiential quality of consciousness at even its simplest levels—such as the experience, say, of seeing a color—red, blue or anything?

RW: Yes. Exactly. I wanted to bring up another big thing: The Other. I know Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) has written about this in profound ways. This is such a fact of life. That person who is different from me, who I don't know, the stranger, is usually regarded with fear and distrust.

JN: The French word that Levinas uses, which is translated simply as "the Other" actually means the other person. It is more like the other mysteriously human being, the other true I there—the I'ness in the other person. This is a huge thing, as you say. And it's on top of another huge thing, the top of a mountain. When he talks about the face, for example, the human face, it's a total mystery! We look at each other. What is this thing called "the face"? It seems like the person, and yet it's just the face. What is it doing? How can it be so meaningful, so beautiful, so terrifying, so uniquely other? And so uniquely related to me. We have no categories to explain why the face has these properties. If you want to talk about the unknown, just bring in the human face. A person's inner world is in the face. I'm manifesting something I didn't intend to. All these little muscles, what do they obey? I'm trying to say that leads to something huge and that is, when I see the other, I feel responsibility. The influence of Levinas on ethics—this weak word that has become sort of flat—he wanted to say that the most fundamental aspect of human life is responsibility toward the other. This is the moral dimension in the deepest sense of the word. The fundamental fact of universal reality is responsibility, is love. Love. In some sense, it includes the All—and it comes in relationship to the other. The incarnation of the life with the other is community. It's in dialogue, in conversation, in an exchange between people, that is the life of man. There is no I without a You.

RW: That's really basic, isn't it?

JN: Basic. When we bring in the element of philosophy, the search for truth, facing the unknown, Socrates is the great emblem, but he's also the great emblem of you and me exchanging. What I'm trying to relate this to is the fundamental work of ethics, of morality, of love. The first step is what I tried to write about in my book *Why Can't We Be Good*. As St. Paul said, "For the good that I would, I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do." So where is the bridge between what I know I ought to do and how I actually behave? There's a huge gap. But there is a bridge, which very few people have understood. And that is the work of listening to another human being. In that work of listening, I'm not required to agree with you, or to love you, but just to listen, to let the other person in. To me this is the great undiscovered, realistic first plank in a bridge that leads from where I am to where I ought to be. So this is related to the other.

RW: Very much so, and if something in me opened up enough so that I could listen to the other, to the stranger, that would be a big step.

JN: It's a huge step, but it's a possible step. We only have to know a little bit—and there's plenty of guidance—we have to develop an intentional attitude toward our own attention, because everybody has enough attention not to identify for a few moments with their own thoughts. It doesn't take much, but it does take some inner work to make a space in the mind to let that other person's words come in.

RW: I'm remembering a few times when I've been confronted with another person who was for me, this other, and having found a way to do exactly what you're talking about, to listen. And as I listened and spoke and listened, the fear began to evaporate. I began to realize this other was not so foreign or strange. This only has to happen once or twice to show one something profound. After that, it's not hard to extrapolate and realize most of this fear comes from illusion.

JN: Very well put, I think. I fear letting go of my opinions. I'm afraid of letting go of how I'm going to respond. It's a real act of courage, in a way, just to listen to the other, let him in, without knowing what the result is going to be.

RW: You know, you're right. It is an act of courage.

JN: And that's the unknown. I'm setting aside the known and making a space and, God, what's going to happen? Most of my listening is preparing to go in and react and respond and be right or whatever. But I give up that and let the person's words come in without even trying to interpret them necessarily. But something is understanding this other person. Isn't that what you're saying?

RW: Absolutely.

JN: So I'm living in an unknown, and the unknown in myself is receiving.

William Sidney Mount, *Turning the Leaf*, 1848

RW: It's so important that you brought up courage. It does take some kind of courage. And as a model of courage, this is something we need.

JN: What a wonderful thing it would be if that model were out there—for younger people especially. Yes, this is courage. This is being a man! And all the models we see on television—people shouting at each other, getting the best of each other. It's the opposite of courage. And you know, when you listen to somebody in the quietly, invisibly, receptive way we have been speaking of, the other person feels it. They feel fed, nourished by that. As a teacher, I see this. It's taken me a lot of failures. First and foremost, the work of a teacher, at least in my area, is to listen. Not to teach, just to listen. And then the teaching that comes out of that is precious.

RW: Let's talk about community. What about the community in its possible function as holding something I need, but don't really know about? That's an important reality.

JN: Of course it is. It's a community of others. It sounds like a paradox. But all too many communities are simply those of similarity, which can become a little bit like a mob. A mob is a community of people who all have the same illusion, the same fear. And there's the inflation of the ego there, too.

RW: That's a very important thing to distinguish, that difference.

JN: Exactly, there are no others there. You see what happens in those crowds or mobs. So a community that doesn't embrace the other is not a community.

RW: A real community could embrace the other and be greater for that, right?

JN: Yes. And there are many levels of that. I think the greatness of America is that it still makes community possible. It's a very great quality of a nation to allow the liberty of people to form spiritual communities, other kinds of communities. The hope is that America allows people to search for conscience. That's its great ideal. The danger is if we lose that. Then America would become just another big powerful dinosaur that will disappear.

RW: Would you consider monastic communities and convents what you've also called an esoteric school?

JN: Yes. Some of them are, others probably not. There must be levels of all of these things. They lose their ch'i. I'm sure that happens all the time. But no doubt they still exist today—Christians and Sufis and so on.

RW: There's an article by Philippe Lavastine called "The Two Vedantas: The Best and the Worst of India" It's remarkable. He writes that something went awry in Hinduism maybe

some hundreds of years ago. It used to be that the search for liberation always took place in the context of the community, in the context of others. But someone introduced the idea of individuals going off alone to pursue this. It became something just for the individual.

JN: He's talking about how self-liberation became the main aim rather than the integration of the inner life with the needs of the community. It's a very powerful article.

RW: I wanted to bring up the experience of seeing. There's the visual experience of something and there's thinking about it. We can both look at those trees. If you try to put what is seen into words, to define each leaf, the different light on each leaf and its exact shape and how they all relate to each other, of course, it would be a hopeless project. At the same time, boom, here's a visual experience of it, full of all this complexity. So this is a kind of knowing, or would it be better described as witnessing? Is there a difference between "seeing" and "knowing"? Maybe it's not the kind of thing we talk about in terms of knowledge.

JN: Many things we talk about as "knowing" are instrumentations of the mind, instruments, like machines. A computer has all these programs and this capacity for storing data. We're working around instruments that are meant to serve something deep in us. A computer is meant to serve a person and it may do "lots of things." A robot may even go to the moon, because it's been programmed in a certain way, but it may not be serving anything of real value. That which is intrinsically an instrument can never be the purpose. It's meant to be an instrument of a strictly human purpose. I think it's something like that. What we call ordinarily call "knowing" is the operation of instruments in our mind which are taking the role of "the knower." The knower may not be there at all in that moment. But when the knower really appears, the instruments submit and obey.

RW: That could be a definition of ordinary life and how my "knowing" masks unknowing. My knowing is not very deep.

JN: Not very deep. Even great scientific discoveries very often come in the moment of the person appearing, the being appearing— and all of the sudden connections are made that really correspond to a deeper level of reality. But then the person retreats, is forgotten, and the mechanical, non-human instruments start taking over. The king appears for a moment, and the people obey him. And suddenly he's gone again. He's a very fragile king. He goes away and suddenly these people start acting like instruments and telling other instruments what to do. The fact that science can make us go to the moon or even cure diseases, up to a point, is not necessarily evidence that it's giving us a deep level of truth. It's giving us something useful up to a point, serving some aim, but, as, Kierkegaard tells us, the truth that doesn't bring us being, that doesn't bring us love, that doesn't bring us goodness, is not working. You can say it works, it's good, but if it doesn't serve the deeply human purpose of relating the divine in us to the world we live in, it doesn't work. In that sense—I mean, it may sound preposterous to say that science doesn't work. It seems to work fantastically well. Look at everything it does. But something that doesn't serve to bring love, beauty, service to others is at best only a half-truth—in a deep sense, it is not really pragmatic.

RW: We live in this fact-based world and science can only do what it can do. It doesn't function as an interior knowing, per se. There is something in the realm of being that has a different axis. So in terms of epistemology, which you brought up earlier, what I know in this other realm depends, in a way, on the kind of being I inhabit. It depends on my state.

JN: We need a language now. State. Consciousness. We need a language based on experience, on what I would like to call an inner empiricism. Science is based on outer empiricism. But there's also an inner empiricism. It shows you the truth of yourself. And when that's awakened, that begins to show you the truth of the world. The instruments

that have been used by science begin to serve something else. We're way over our heads in this discussion, as it should be if we're talking about the unknown.

Let's remember that all the teachings of the great traditions, the spiritual traditions, are based on experience. When they say, it comes from God, it comes from God into the God in man. And it's due to the human receptacle that revelation appears. Revelation is another world for higher consciousness that comes and meets the instruments that we're born with, through evolution or whatever, and humanizes and even divinizes them into something extraordinary. So there's a kind of meaning of interiority that is not at all what people mean, usually. It's not just my thoughts, my feelings, it's an energy of a very high and fine quality that when it comes in touch with the instruments of the self, it divinizes them. They serve. So spiritual practice is a form of inner empiricism, in that sense. Therefore it's correct to call it a science, science of the inner life. The inner life is intrinsically private. But we can share our experience through language. Maybe we have to use music. Maybe we have to sing. Maybe we have to just look at each other. But all the methods of spiritual traditions, prayer, ritual—all of them are rooted in experience.

RW: And there's this realm of experience, for instance, often people report knowing beforehand, say, that a parent died. They had a dream, or they just suddenly hear a voice.

JN: We're coming to the big mystery, the big unknown, death.

RW: I thought of that when you said the inner life is intrinsically private. But it's interesting that the great religions tell us that we're all connected. And sometimes there are things that happen that show there are connections that we simply don't understand. Skeptics try to debunk such things, but I don't think it can all be debunked.

JN: That's right. And we suffer from not making those connections in our lives much at all. When they do occur, it looks like a miracle, but it's more like a normal human connection.

RW: Sometimes with animals you see there's something going on that's more subtle than I'm aware of. There are many stories, evidence of such things.

JN: Yes. Anyone who lives with an animal, unless they have such a preconceived view that nothing can break through, knows things are going on with animals that are astonishing. There are certain states that almost everybody has experienced, but if the mind is full of toxic ideas they won't be able to feel the awe and wonder of it. The original meaning of "wonder" is more like astonishment, not just, "Oh, isn't that interesting." In a certain state, we can go into the woods or the forest or even walk out into a garden, and suddenly, the trees start speaking to us [laughs] —not in words, obviously. The poor trees are trying to communicate with us!

RW: This is unknown to my ordinary, kind of sleeping mind, but known in a moment when I'm more awake somehow.

JN: When you're more awake, then nature is there to call to you. Where did we lose this intimacy with nature, with the earth? That's what my book is about. What is this intimacy that the earth requires and wishes and yearns for from us? Not just to fix the problems we've created—of course, we've got to fix them—but the earth wants something more from us. It wants the uniquely human from us. We are not human enough for nature now, for the earth. We came into being on the earth from, probably from the sun and from above the sun, in order to be human. The earth needs us. We're not here just for ourselves. The earth needs our consciousness. It needs us to be human. If we're not going to be human, what's the poor earth going to do? It's going to go on, yes, but it may go on as a kind of lifeless planet. Anyway, that's why my book is called *An Unknown World*.

RW: And what is my place in this existence? But even science now, when you get down to the deepest layers of quantum physics, is baffled. There's quantum uncertainty and non-locality, parallel universes, and string theory's eleven or twelve dimensions. I mean if you've got eleven dimensions, what's the difference between that and "it's turtles all the way down"?

JN: It's dimensions all the way down [laughing]. You know, the one idea we have to bring in here is microcosm. That man is a miniature universe. Therefore there may be something in our organism, in our nervous system, in our brain, which is sensitive to these infinite levels of vibrations coming to us from the stars and their galaxies and all that. Maybe when we have a true, deep experience of selfness, a true experience of the true being of consciousness within ourselves, maybe that is connecting us with something that is out there at another level of intelligence, another level of life. I don't know what to call it.

RW: That reminds me of something Krishnamurti said—that we need to become like the new Spring leaves on the lemon trees near his home. They're so tender that the sunlight comes through them. He said we have to become that tender, that open. To be that open, without tensions or thoughts—we have reports that give evidence of capacities that seem almost magical. I have a friend who told me that his Hindu guru often just spoke to his thoughts without needing to hear any spoken words. I've heard quite a few stories of that sort from people who are completely credible. And there are plenty of written accounts of such things.

JN: The question that comes with these special gifts and powers is what they serve in us, what we want to do with them if we have them. There's a higher question about people who are that sensitive. Do they have an aim that's honorable and corresponds to what is good for the world? So it's a kind of intelligence of the heart we have to work for very seriously, because there are these powers, there are these things that happen. There's just no question about that. People can look for scientific evidence in a skeptical, cynical way, but this kind of evidence doesn't come in a lab. The world is full of evidence of this sort of thing. In fact, come on, it's a miracle that we're sitting here talking! I mean, people take it for granted. Everything that exists is a bloody miracle! How the hell is that flower doing that? "Oh, yes. I know. The genes and so on." Yes, we can explain a lot about the world, but the world itself is a mystery. And when something is really discovered, it doesn't cover this over. It's a revelation, but then it's forgotten that it was a revelation of something deeper. The miracle I'm used to is no longer a miracle.

William Sidney Mount, Caught Napping, 1848

RW: I wanted to quote from your book: "In a word, we cannot be ourselves without, at the same time, rooting ourselves in God. We cannot be independent beings without depending entirely on a higher force that penetrates our specifically human consciousness. ... Otherwise our entire life is self-deception." So my ordinary way of living in my own personal little independent, separate world, is not so good, at least if I'm interested in what's Real.

JN: It's the opposite of good. Life on earth, including human life, consists of deep contradictions, contradictions and their resolution. I am totally dependent on this higher, inner life and yet I must choose it, or it won't act in me. There's a total freedom and a total dependency at the same time. When we experience a deep moment of self-remembering or however you want to describe it, this energy comes into to our tissues and fills us with this calm light, as Gurdjieff puts it. It's saying, "I am here. I'm you. Let me into your life." It wants to come into our lives. It's more I than I am. There's an

idea abroad that the highest reality, or God, in some Asian religions is impersonal energy. It's not. There's a widely shared view that while the God of Western religions is personal (God is a person you can pray to, etc.) the God of many Eastern religions is impersonal. That's just a superficial and misleading view. The higher energy of the universe is always "I"—it's always I-ness. It's part of fundamental reality. When it touches us, I know this is me. I belong here. I am home. Isn't that what we're speaking about? If you haven't had that taste, of course, you're free to be a cynic. That's where great ideas are needed and great philosophy, great music, great art, to remind us who we are. There are so many toxic ideas, so much toxic art, so many things that make us forget. There's a metaphysical glass ceiling. No matter what happens, it's explained by reducing it to something lower than it is. It's the unknown. How can we go farther with that? So the mind has some way of recognizing this and therefore knowing what it wants. Nowadays when young people and others, when they experience this other energy, which people do from time to time accidentally, they don't know what to call it. They don't know its significance. They don't realize that their true nature is calling to them and this is what they're meant to be. Instead it's maybe only a so-called "peak experience"—great, but now let's get back to reality. But that was reality! That brings me to this other question of the unknown, death. Isn't that the great unknown that Socrates speaks about?

RW: Yes.

JN: None of us know how we're going to be in front of that. It's almost always terrifying, of course. But it's possible, even for such as us, in a certain state, to experience an energy for a moment that's outside of time. It's timeless. It's unborn. It's undying. Even if you touch that only for a second, you know that there is something else. Something else independent of time that you that you didn't know about. That's the great unknown. And yet, it's the great known, too. The great unknown is so intimately known under the surface of ourselves that it's incomprehensible to our ordinary sense of knowledge. Most of us have some moments like that in our lives. But very little in our cultural world-view helps understand their real significance. As Michel de Salzmann said once, "There's only one transmigrant in all beings. There's only one real being that's constantly being born." I think this statement of his has to do with the "I-ness" of ultimate reality.

RW: I have this question about all this that I take to be me, mine, myself, all my abilities, my thoughts, my problems. But every now and then I get an inkling that maybe nearly all of this has been given to me. It's not mine and it's an illusion to think it's me, mine. It came from my father, my mother. It came from their parents and down the line. So I've had this inkling that there's really very little I can really claim as my own.

JN: That's very interesting.

RW: It relates to what you were saying, I think.

JN: Absolutely. Again, to quote Michel de Salzmann: "There's one thing that is my own. Everything else is given—by society, by heredity, by conditioning, by education, by others. The one thing I can say that's mine, that's myself, is my attention." I think there is something to that. All that humanity can really hope for is in that. ♦