

Money can buy anything, except meaning by Jurriaan Kamp with Jacob Needleman

□
□□The philosopher Jacob Needleman has written about ethics, religion and leadership, but he is perhaps best known for his book *Money and the Meaning of Life*. The book links our relationship with money to the ways in which we find out what matters most in our lives. When it comes to personal finance, Needleman argues, we come to a greater understanding of ourselves by understanding the true meaning of money.

□
□□When *Money and the Meaning of Life* came out in 1994, it was regarded as a warning: If we continue to treat money in such an unbalanced way, we're doomed. What's happened since then?

□
□□“If that book was a warning, the warning was not heeded. We're much worse off now, obviously. Everything can collapse at any minute. And the illusions of money are becoming painfully clear. At the same time, there's the paradox that it is a reality. You have to take money into account in the real world. So this is still the same question: How do we realize money is a brilliant piece of social technology without defining ourselves by it? Humans are two-natured beings. One is the spirit; the other is life in the real world. We need to live in both in order to correspond to both sides of our nature. Money penetrates every aspect of our worldly life. In order to deal with money and not to lose one's soul, we still have to play the game.”

□
□□What's at the core of our problematic relationship with money?

□
□□“To answer that, we have to include a study of ourselves, of our own relation to money. There is no one who is normal about money. Do you know anybody who isn't a little strange with money, a little hypocritical, or at least a little conflicted? What we've done wrong with money has to do with an increasing error about our understanding of what it means to be a human being in our culture. At the same time, there are movements introducing spiritual ideas into culture, much more now than 20 years ago. At the center, it's a loss of what brings meaning to our lives. That was the point of my book: *Money can buy anything, except meaning*. To put it in a nutshell, it comes from the balance of these two parts of ourselves.”

□
□□And a life without meaning is no life at all.

□
□□“That's the most important thing in our life: meaning. You can have all kinds of pleasure, but without meaning you wind up with despair. What I've discovered since writing that book was is that human beings were built to give. To put it in the most extreme form, we're built to love and serve something greater than ourselves, whether it's other people, something you call God, or whether it's justice. Until we are finding our way to give, there

will be no happiness or meaning. Temporarily, I can feel I'm succeeding and respected, but in the end, there has to be a kind of giving. That's what we haven't understood. Because giving has been put into some kind of tax deduction."

□

□□So our relationship with money is kind of taboo, like sex used to be?

□

□□"In earlier times, you could not talk honestly about sex, yet it entered into -everything. Money, like sex, is there in almost everything we do. There are a few people who think they do not need money, that they can just be idealistic. If we were to really -observe how we are with money, we would see that we are suppressing it. We are being -hypocritical about it. You can observe that: After anybody with some money dies, just watch what happens with the will. -Ninety percent of the time, horrible, terrible things happen. It used to be that in cultured -circles, you did not mention money. It was dirty. In that sense, it is comparable [to the way people once used to act, think and talk about sex]. It really does enter into almost all the aspects of our life now. It is a source of our values, and a source of our immorality."

□

□□What happens when people suddenly get a lot of money?

□

□□"If you're nervous, anxious and greedy when you have no money, when you get a lot of money, you're going to be rich, nervous, anxious and greedy. It doesn't do anything to change your being. If I were to get \$10 million today, in about a week I'd be worried about what I'm doing. I don't think money changes your essential nature at all. On the surface, maybe. When I get a big check sometimes, I feel secure for a short while, and then I'm the same person."

□

□□We tie money to success. How else could we define success?

□

□□"When you have discovered what your gift is as a human being. Whether you can play the piano, write books, earn money, or whether you're good with children and you have served your gift by helping other people. Of course you have to be sharp, strong, clever, competitive and care for the material sides of life, but in the overall trajectory of life: Your life has served other human beings. That would be success."

□

□□Why did we replace that concept of success with money in the first place?

□

□□"Money helps you do what you want to do. And what you want to do is something that will bring your life meaning. It helps to accomplish those things. On the other hand, the struggle wakes you up. That's what it's really all about: waking up. The money question: If it serves to wake me up to what I want, what I wish for, what I'm willing to sacrifice for, what I'm not going to compromise for, then I feel alive. I feel meaningful. That brings life. I don't think it's naive to say you can't really fail, going in that direction. You might lose the deal here or there, but something in you has been nourished that's truly human. You become what in my Jewish culture we call a real human being: a mensch. Be a mensch."

□

□□"Mensch" is German for "human."

□

□□"Yes, what does it mean to be human? Let me tell you a story from Mexico. A 35-year-old man and his 5-year-old child were decorating their house on Christmas Eve, and a beggar about the same age as his child came to the door. In Mexico, begging is accepted. The man asked his son to go to the living room and give the beggar one of his toys. His son chose an old toy. The father said no and asked him to give the beggar his favorite toy. His son resisted. The father stood firm. Finally the son brought the toy he had just gotten for

Christmas to the beggar, while his father waited in the living room. Suddenly, the son returned, beaming, to his father, shouting, 'Daddy, can I do that again?' The little boy had -discovered something."

□

□□You argued in your book that money should play a secondary role in society, a facilitating role. Can you explain that?

□

□□"It should assist, as an instrument, the search for meaning. If one is searching for something honorably human, money should aid that. It's a tool, not an end in itself. Then you have to ask yourself: What is it doing for me? What aim do I have that money is serving? Painful sincerity is needed for that because we may be shocked what money means to us. That's the first step in detoxifying money. If you want to help any cause in this culture, it always takes money."

□

□□That brings us back to the meeting of the two worlds.

□

□□"It does. Money is not the most important thing, but it's a necessary instrument. You can't drive a car without gasoline. Gasoline in itself is not primary, but without it you can't do it. I think you can't live without money. It's just the way this world is built. It's taken the place of values in so many areas. Slowly, gradually, it's become the measure of value of all kinds of things, things that shouldn't be valued monetarily, like art and music and religion."

□

□□And relationships.

□

□□"It is part of it. What is it about money that makes people feel secure, happy and powerful? We have to face that question. I say money doesn't mean that much but if I'm in the presence of somebody I'm told is a billionaire, suddenly I'm a little more respectful to the guy. Why? He's not going to radiate his dollars onto me. This defining value has practically entered our DNA."

□

□□You also argue that we don't take money seriously. And that's kind of strange because, it seems we take it too seriously.

□

□□"No, you do take it seriously. Say you have a sick child, and you don't know what to do. You have to observe that child and be very, very attentive. And you can't make any mistakes. You can't go off into fantasies because a life is at stake. That means you're serious about something and when you are, you're free. If you get swallowed by it and are full of fear, anxiety, blame, guilt and imagination, you're not going to be able to care for the child. So being serious means not being swallowed by something. A person who defines his life by getting money is not serious about money. Being serious means giving full attention to it, meaning you're aware of yourself, not consumed by your fantasies, fears or desires, but your attention is concentrated. Money requires that in our life."

□

□□What is the biggest misconception we have about money?

□

□□"There are actually two misconceptions, and I'm not trying to be clever. One is that money can buy anything. The other is that money can't do anything. There are so many jokes about this. My favorite is: What money can't buy, a lot of money can buy. Seriously, though, money is important; it's just secondary. Money is so important now in our society. We have to respect people who have a lot of money. It takes hard work and often discipline, and we could not do any good in the world without them. And at the end of the day, we all have the same problems: What are we here for?"

□

□□What one piece of advice would you give people about money?

□

□□“Learn to be quiet: learn to be still. Live your life just as you’ve been living it, for a while. Don’t change anything, except little things: study, question. This is the kind of answer Gandhi would give: What do you wish to serve? How can your money serve something that is not just good for your ego or comfort but for others? Reflect, find some friends and start talking about the question: What should we do? What is right? And then, act.”