

## Why Can't We Be Good?: Overcoming Obstacles to Our Higher Ideals by Steve Heilig

Audio interview of Jacob Needleman with Steve Heilig:

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Jacob Needleman is a professor of philosophy at San Francisco State University and the author of many books, including *The American Soul*, *The Wisdom of Love*, *Time and the Soul*, *The Heart of Philosophy*, *Lost Christianity*, and *Money and The Meaning of Life*. In addition to his teaching and writing, he serves as a consultant in the fields of psychology, education, medical ethics, philanthropy, and business, and has been featured on Bill Moyers's acclaimed PBS series *A World of Ideas*. [Jacob Needleman's website](#)>>

Steve Heilig is the Director of Public Health and Education for The San Francisco Medical Society and a Research Associate for The Collaborative on Health and the Environment (CHE) at Commonweal.

This conversation was held on June 7th, and recorded without a live audience.

Some highlights from this talk:

"When I started studying spiritual traditions in graduate school in California—Buddhism and then finally Christianity and Judaism—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 was to try to see if there was a bridge, where the ancient values and ideas about human beings and the universe could throw light on actual, contemporary, concrete problems of our culture and our personal lives."

"I had no idea that it was right in front of me, a kind of practical step that we can all take to becoming the moral beings we wish to be. And that bridge was in my classroom with the work of listening to another person. Listening becomes a deeply moral action. And this is something we can all practice. And I discovered—working with my students and working with them working 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 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."

"The question of [his book, *The American Soul*] was the meaning of America really. And I tried to discover—I did discover, I think—that 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. That to me is the whole reason, 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."

"I have the view, and I try to 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. And 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 this means working with each other. But my point, and I try to show it in the book, is we are 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 moralistic and all that, but I believe it is the deepest truth of our human nature."

Full Transcript of the talk is also available.