

We Are Connected In Mysterious Ways by Jacob Needleman

[The full audio of the following dialogue is available [here](#).] Point Reyes Dialogues explores the great questions of life and our current condition within the context of the spiritual revolution of California begun in the 1960s and continuing today. We inquire into their broad impact on culture, education, religious life and moral values. Host Jacob Needleman, philosopher, author and teacher discusses these questions with guests who are recognized internationally for their philosophic, religious and spiritual influence.

Richard Whittaker is the founding editor of the art journal, works & conversations and is the West Coast editor of Parabola magazine. Although he holds degrees in philosophy and clinical psychology, he has been immersed in the arts for over 50 years and works in ceramics, painting, sculpture and photography.

Jacob Needleman: Well, here we are, Richard. We've known each other a long time. Over the years I've known you, there came a point where you started to create a magazine. And maybe we can start from that because basically, as I see it—and of course, as you present it— it has to do with conversations. And that is something I want to speak about, what it means to have a real conversation. But to start with, these are conversations with artists. Isn't that right?

Richard Whittaker: Yes, that's right.

JN: Artists mainly in the...

RW: Mostly in the visual arts, but certainly not limited to that.

JN: And so you've gone for several years discovering artists that have surprised you, because every time a magazine, an issue comes out, you have that look in your eyes that you've made a real discovery. And you point to something and say read this. And I do, and it's astonishing to me the depth that you reveal, that you help artists speak about. It's one of the most interesting and important things you've discovered in these years of speaking seriously with artists.

RW: Well, you're right. There's a real joy in the discoveries I make. What have I discovered over the years?—and it's been over 20 years now. One thing that becomes much clearer is that there's a commonality among artists. And I'm sure this is true for everyone who has something to do with the creative process itself. The creative process, clearly, is some kind of fundamental fact that probably hasn't changed in millennia. The Greeks even had gods, the Muses, who stood for these heightened energies that can flow through us. So it's become more and more clear that, in general, artists all know at least something about this energy that can appear and which, really, is transformative. It changes a person's state. And in fact, I think once you've experienced it, there's a wish to return to that kind of energy.

JN: Absolutely. Absolutely. I know exactly what you mean—as a writer what that means. These artists really are some that produce remarkably interesting work. And they describe what you're talking about, this contact with some force, some life, some dimension. But the question has always haunted me about how and why or how that process could be reflected in one's life, one's living. Would you say there is also creativity like the art of living in some way that could embody the same kind of process, but over the scale of one's actual life, day-to-day life? There must be something to that, because it's always astonished me that some of the greatest artists have had the most troubling lives. That the way, somehow the creativity and goodness that pours through their art does not seem so easy to find that in one's actual art of living so to say. Do you see that as a question too?

RW: Well, I don't know if I see it as a question, exactly. It seems to me that creativity is something that belongs to everyone. Unfortunately it seems that, maybe because of our education, people are not shown how to pay attention to these kinds of creative impulses. I don't know if suppression is the right word. Certainly people wouldn't suppress that on purpose, but I think this idea of creativity only belonging in the realm of artists is completely false. Not only does creativity belong to all of us, but it can appear anywhere in life, it seems to me. For people who have some kind of openness to the appearance of creativity, life is a different thing than just going along the tracks that you're familiar with and staying within those tracks.

JN: I find that a wonderful ideal and how to live from that, because with creativity goes the word freedom it seems to me. And the freedom of the artist in their art, but also in life is not the sometimes conventional or everyday or more ordinary sense that I do whatever I like, whatever I want I do it. That's freedom. That could be very childish. That could be just chaos. And how I understand freedom first of all philosophically, but secondly I think and most importantly in life, is what do I obey? I find when I am most free is when I am most obedient to something higher than myself for a moment or deeper than myself. And I think to me, that's a very vital paradox.

RW: Yes. This whole question of freedom is such a deep question. And the "freedom of the artist" is probably not the same kind of freedom that is ultimately possible for people

who, let's say, have been in a spiritual practice for 40 years. I'm sure there's a kind of freedom that's much more rare than what one might call the freedom of the artist. And I don't know what the freedom of the artist is, exactly. I'm not of the opinion that one has to suffer unduly in order to be an "artist." That whole model of drinking too much, indulging in all kinds of things as a necessary part of being an artist seems questionable to me. On the other hand, having somehow learned through—who knows what? luck? through some kind of support that might appear at certain important parts in one's life—having learned to be sensitive to some other voices in oneself that can appear, and having learned how to listen to these things, then one can follow these promptings from perhaps other parts of ourselves. We can call it intuition, maybe. And yes, I think that would relate to the question of obeying, or at least listening to, these parts of myself.

I heard someone the other day quote some statistics from recent brain studies, something to the effect that the ordinary conscious mind can process, let's say 100 interactions a second. And the unconscious mind, as this guy was saying, could handle, let's say, a million a second. This is not the actual numbers, but the difference between the two is tremendous. So we're always receiving a great deal of information that we're not aware of. On the other hand, I think we can learn to be more sensitive to these subtle promptings that come to us. If we're able to be sensitive to these impulses and insights and intuitions that come to us, we might be able to follow them. I think artists tend to be somewhat more open to these things. I think of it in that way—that people who follow this not very well defined path in our culture of "being an artist" have been able to be more open to these subtle promptings from themselves. I don't think that makes them free, exactly.

JN: No, not exactly. But it is a very important question about how to understand it in the act of living. Is there creativity in human relations, for example? To me, it's a new thought right now. But if there is such a thing as ethics in a deep moral sense, and not in any rigid following a code no matter what, although there is some interest in that, too—is there creativity in human relations with family, with friends, with higher-ups, lower-downs? Wouldn't that be an interesting question?

RW: Absolutely. That is an interesting question. To bring it back to what we were talking about earlier that might have some relation to art or creativity. I would say that the question I have is what promptings to follow in myself, what promptings that appear in myself in relation to you, in relation to somebody. Which promptings to follow?

JN: Yes, yes.

RW: There are always these conventions standing between me and how I deal with my intuitions. One hopes there is an intelligence that can appear, too. One doesn't follow every prompting, and that's obvious. On the other hand, are there promptings that I should allow myself to follow that perhaps I'm a little uncertain about? Let's say I'm afraid to say something to someone. This is an ongoing question for me and I've actually experimented with this. I'll say yes to certain kinds of impulses even though I might

be uncertain, or even a little scared, about acting on them. Perhaps I have a sudden impulse to give someone a hug, for instance. Now this is not something I was trained to do. I might be rejected; I'm afraid it might not be the right moment or that I'm being intrusive. But I've found that when I've followed that impulse is that it's just exactly what was needed. It couldn't have been a better impulse. So does that relate to what you're saying?

JN: Absolutely, absolutely. I mean I don't know about you, but I've found very few people really resist a hug. But to get back to what we're talking about is this creativity in relationships and following certain promptings that come from oneself. And this takes us right into the heart of what you're doing and what we're doing in this Point Reyes Dialogues, which is the art or work of conversation. You and I have both been working for years at conversation; you with the artist and others and I with people, serious people I know. For me, there is an art of listening that is both rigorous and creative. It can be sometimes.

RW: Yes.

JN: And I couldn't say that I follow certain promptings. Or I could say that, but for me, my experience is that I have to be able to separate myself from my own mind, my own thoughts in order to listen. And then at some time, the prompting comes so deeply, so irresistibly. Don't you feel that way?

RW: Yes, yes. Absolutely. I would want to say that the whole enterprise of the magazine—I could characterize it as a kind of work of following these quiet promptings. And in a conversation, this thing about separating myself from my mind, I totally relate to that. I have an example that is a good instance of that. I was approached by a stranger at an art event where I had a table with the magazines spread out. People would approach me; some would come up and say, "You ought to do something about me in the magazine. I'm an artist and so forth." I don't like to hurt people's feelings, but I am pretty particular about the kinds of things that go into the magazine. So there's generally a kind of negotiation where I am trying to be nice, but I immediately know that I'm not interested. In this case a woman approached me and shoved a little photo in front of me and said very bluntly, "You should do a story on me." I'd already sized her up a little bit and everything in me was saying "Forget about it." I had this judgment, but thank heavens there was some other impulse, a thought not to just totally accept that first judgment. So I asked her to sit down next to me and I said, "Okay, so tell me, why should I do a story on you?"

JN: Yes.

RW: And what came out was absolutely astonishing. Within a few minutes I knew not only that I was going to interview this woman, but of all the people in that art fair there couldn't have been one person there more suitable for hearing her story than me.

JN: That must have been—that was a creative moment when you asked her to sit down and tell you.

RW: Yes, I think that was.

JN: That's an interesting moment.

RW: It is an interesting moment. One thing I've discovered in trying to have a conversation with a stranger is that it's almost impossible for it to go so badly that it's not worth it.

JN: That's an interesting discovery. There you are.

RW: I think I would say I've discovered that it's worthwhile trying to talk to almost anybody.

JN: There's a discovery worth headlining.

RW: Yes.

JN: Interesting. And there's a world of truth and beauty in that statement.

RW: There is. I mean, it's really worth trying to talk to anybody.

JN: It's worth trying, because it wouldn't be worth talking to just anybody if I were just my old-fashioned everyday self; there are people I get turned off by, bored with or I'm afraid of them in some social way, but if I make an effort to listen to them, holy smoke! They

become three-dimensional! They become human beings.

RW: It happens over and over again.

JN: So that's of value. A conversation of this kind, it seems to me, is a key to discovering the humanity in another person, between us, a shared humanity.

RW: Yes.

JN: And this to me, I put it in a certain way which it sounds exaggerated, but I don't think so. It's kind of the first real practical step of love, not that you're going to wind up loving these people at all, not at all. But that is an element that points to love, even if it's only the first baby step and may not go past the first step.

RW: Yes. I think there's something I don't understand, but I think I have just a hint of the profound way, metaphysically even, that we're connected to each other. In some mysterious way I am you and you are I. Certainly, I don't feel that I've understood this as deeply as it may be possible to understand it. But there is some way in which I have to be able to listen to you, if I want to move in the direction of the kind of life that's possible for us here.

JN: That's fantastic, very, very interesting because that could be taken in a sentimental New Age way. But on the contrary this is not sentimental.

RW: No, not at all. No, there is nothing sentimental about that. There is something mysterious, I would say.

JN: Mysterious. Yes. But to hear it spoken about like this could be frightening to some people. What would that mean if people who were hostile to each other's points of view at least, were to try to listen? It sounds like a cliché, but what we're speaking about is way beyond cliché.

RW: Yes. Well certainly listening to someone and talking with them can be—I mean it always is—an adventure. And it can be fraught with problems. I know there are people who have worked on how you would talk with those with whom you have very little

connection and also have strong negative inclinations. But of course, generally speaking, the people I engage with in the magazine, I've already intuited that we have some things in common. But the larger question of just talking with others, I mean there are skills involved in how to negotiate an encounter with another person. I think that, ultimately somehow, if you can get through some of these tricky parts, something very important, and needed, can happen.

JN: It's worth it. It really is worth trying. There are certain people that you know in advance maybe and in certain conditions that they're never going to try and listen. And this way they are never going to be able to, because there is something, a motivation, it may be money, it may be power. It may be some kind of thing they're trying to win. They are trying to appear in a certain way. There probably are people it's not worth even trying to do it. But almost everybody in my experience, they respond not so much to what I said, but to my effort to give attention to them. They don't even know maybe that that's what they're responding to. But the attention you can give to another person is interesting to them sometimes and opens them in a way that suddenly they feel safe or they feel respected not from what I've said, but just from the attention. That human beings need a certain kind of attention from each other that's not ordinarily there.

RW: That's really very interesting what you say. And I can't say that I've really thought very much about exactly how you've put it. And yet I had a very interesting experience just a few days ago, which was surprising. It showed me that it's very good not to just give into one's sort of negative feelings, let's say, not always to steer your life in a direction to avoid difficulties. This had to do with a personal relationship, a situation where I would be obliged to be in conversation and also in a role of some kind of responsibility. A part of me wanted to avoid it, and probably could have.

What happened was that the person I was apprehensive about interacting with spoke in a way that was utterly unexpected, even shocking, because of the sensitivity and the tenderness. I wondered, how could this have happened? It might have happened because I'd had a very difficult conversation earlier with this person and I had really tried to be sincere and to listen. Maybe it's not necessarily what is said so much as the way in which one holds the space and listens—and the way one regards the other person, and what one holds oneself to, somehow. Does that make sense to you? I think that's what you were talking about.

JN: Absolutely. Absolutely. I remember talking once years ago, having a conversation with an African American woman. I was working on a project that she was on too. I liked her. We got along. And so she was a good person, I mean for me as far as I could see. At one point we were sitting alone in a room and I started to talk to her about the difficulties of the situation with racial prejudice. And I had this impulse to say something like you must feel this all the time; something like that. I've forgotten exactly what happened. It was a kind of an impulse, but not impulsive, but an impulse that I wanted to talk to this person just to get human, more human with her. And she started, she said yes in a rather superficial way. It was at a time when there was a lot of media stuff going on about reimbursing or compensating African Americans for the slavery. And I talked about that to her. And she acknowledged it. I've forgotten exactly where it went, but at one point I had

the impression as she spoke and the reluctance to go into it much more, I had the impression beneath the surface that came right up to the surface, because I was trying to let her in and listen. I had the impression that she was ashamed. My mind said to me, why should she be ashamed? It's not her fault. It has nothing to do with her, but that she was ashamed at first of herself; ashamed of being black, ashamed of the racial problems she had. And suddenly I started speaking to her in a way, feeling great respect for her. And we talked more and we went very deeply into this question and came out with a strong connection of respect, common humanity, common understanding. She was - and suddenly she started weeping with joy, with happiness, with interest.

RW: Wow.

JN: It was just my god! How could I not have seen? Maybe some sociologist might have had the theory about this and explained it, but to actually feel the shame in that person totally made me understand all of the compensation in the world, all of the laws passed in the world. They would be all very important, nothing would happen unless we understood and saw and listened to them to see that that emotional thing was at the bottom of all of their suffering really, of most of their suffering.

RW: That's quite a story. I certainly find myself saddled sometimes with quite a bit of apprehension in talking with African Americans because of all the terrible stuff that has happened, and the deep feelings that are present. I'm aware of that. At the same time I try not to be guilty of the same sins of our forbearers and so forth. I did have this experience with an African American man at the counter getting a ticket. I was part of this small film festival and he was taking tickets. I was one of the organizers and was chatting with him a little bit. And he mentioned that he played the flute. I said, "Oh, probably jazz, right?" And he looked at me and he said, "You say that because I am an African American, don't you?" I was really put on the spot there and I thought, well, I'll just have to be honest. And I said, "Well, yeah, that's true." I think my honesty with him, I mean, it was really good. We continued our conversation and it became very deep, very quickly—I mean in a matter of minutes. It was very intimate and I felt, oh my god, this is unbelievable! The connection was amazing. At the end of the evening, we went out together with a few other people to a bar and continued the conversation. His story was so incredible that I asked if he would agree to being interviewed. I interviewed him and it's in the magazine [Marvin Sanders--Magic Flute, issue #13].

JN: That's wonderful. You came in touch with a deeper part of yourself by that honesty. The person that said yes took the chance to say yes.

RW: That's right.

JN: It was another person than is usually in conversations, another level of yourself. Not only the fact that you said it, it could have been said in a way that didn't make that much of that kind of remark, but I don't what he felt. But it also released something in him to be related to you in that way, to be that honest. It's the same thing that I've experienced. If you go deep, your going deep caused their depth; depth caused the depth.

RW: Hmm. Yes, I think it was something like that. Absolutely.

JN: That's really interesting, because then the secret of listening is that the more I listen to the other, the more I listen to myself. The deeper I go into myself, the deeper I can go into the other. Not in any way suspect, but as depth caused the depth. Because you can't spend your time with everybody doing that, but a lot more of that can be done in one's everyday life. Isn't it so?

RW: Oh yes, I think so. And this can probably be cultivated.

JN: I think so.

RW: Some years ago I went through a Master's program in clinical psychology. They have a course in listening. That's a skill that any psychotherapist needs to cultivate. We listen with our bodies. We listen with our feelings. The explicit words are just a small part of what's being communicated. So a basic skill you have to learn as a psychotherapist is listening carefully and deeply. The more people learn this, the better we would be. But certainly a huge part of that, as you say, is listening to myself, because things come to me through all these different parts of myself. And if I am able to attend to myself, attend to what my body is doing, what my feelings are doing, to the thoughts that randomly seem to appear. All this stuff is information. Then it takes a little discrimination to start to sort it out. The more I am attending, the more I am listening, the more of that information I become aware of.

JN: The more something in myself can cut through all of that—some pure attention toward myself and toward the other person—I think that is what we are speaking of here, when we touch this pure attention that's not interested in winning or getting anything or shaping it or directing it, but just the act of attention in and for itself. It must be the most important healing for the whole work of a therapist and, probably, of human relationships—because we all can have experiences of something like that. Talking to ordinary people at the checkout counter or on a bus, or just a moment of that, is something that can take place almost in any situation with another person. That pure attention—relatively, I guess you have to say, but simply that pure human attention—is the most extraordinary human and humanizing force in ourselves and between ourselves.

RW: I would agree with that. And I think that's also kind of mysterious. It's a mysterious thing.

JN: Yes, it is.

RW: Wouldn't you agree there's a way in which I don't know, I don't really know myself in some sense—in terms of you're looking at me and listening to me; I'm listening to you and looking at you. On a certain level, if that attention is strong enough, it's very powerful. And people can absolutely—people will respond to it. They won't even know what they're responding to. They won't know, but they feel something. It's a very powerful thing. Like I said, it's very mysterious.

JN: It's mysterious because there are many disguises that pretend to listen. And some of it is just a façade that can be seductive and all that, but what you're speaking about is it's mysterious, because it's connected to something mysterious in ourselves that has nothing to do with, or very little to do with, the games and goals of the personality and the ego.

RW: Right. Of course I mean, getting back to psychology for a minute, something very close to this was Carl Rogers' entire premise, that this kind of listening was the healing thing.

JN: I knew his work a little and I am sure that something of what we're saying was embodied in what he was doing as a therapist. I suppose it has all kinds of aspects, but it was a purely human transcending whether it was therapy or everyday human relationships. The mystery of spiritual power or of spiritual love, as I study the great masters and spiritual teachers of all the past or traditions, is this mysterious paradox. The more they are disinterested, the more they are separate—in a way. The more they are not taken by the forces of life and human relationships, emotions, the more they are able to love, the more they are able to care, the more they are able to help. The more disinterested, the more they love.

If you look at stories of Christ, Buddha, some of the saints, not all of them obviously, some of the great masters, any of the Tibetan masters or in the Sufi tradition or any tradition, they are not too much concerned about the kind of problems of our life that we're concerned with. They go toward something else. They are not interested in the therapeutic element, which is fine. Therapy is a great thing. But they are not interested in those problems so much. You have to look hard to find great spiritual teachers who are deeply interested in the personal emotional problems of everyday life that we are very troubled by all the time, and which we need therapists for. They are interested in something else.

So that when you hear of a spiritual tradition that emphasizes the purification of the emotions, bhakti or something like that, yoga, they don't care about the negative emotions, about worry, about rejection, about hurt feelings. It's just not on their radar. What's on their radar is something deeper than that. What I am saying is I think we can put it in our life. The more I am separate from my ego, obviously, the more the self can appear and care for the other person.

RW: I imagine that the people that you're speaking about, I mean the exemplars, great teachers, roshis and so forth who can listen to people and they are not going to get caught in the emotions and so forth, that they are—clearly they're not in a position of not caring. It's not like I don't give a damn.

JN: Not at all.

RW: That isn't what it is. If anything these are people very aware on pretty much all the levels as complete people. But I'm speculating that there's a kind of stability that some people reach where this kind of attention that you speak of is free enough. It's not getting trapped in this emotional layer, which we all tend to get trapped in—except sometimes we don't. If one can hold on to a kind of inner presence to the situation without being caught in it and have some kind of compassion, this is a different level—and who wouldn't feel something about that. As I said, I'm speculating. One doesn't want to lose a certain kind of...

JN: Humanity.

RW: Yes.

JN: I think that it would be wrong to think that these great teachers don't have the same emotions. It's just that they are probably not swept away by them so much as we are. But how can I be compassionate towards another unless I experience the same thing in myself? That reminds me of that story about Moses. There's a king who lives far away from where Moses is. He hears these stories of this great spiritual man and sends his portrait painter a thousand miles or whatever, a hundred miles away, to paint a picture of this great man, a portrait. The artist goes there and comes back with the picture and the king looks at it and says, "This cannot be the picture of the man I heard about! This man is full of vice in his eyes, and is full of sin." And he's very angry at the portrait painter. And he goes to visit Moses himself. He speaks to Moses about this painting that was so awful and Moses says to him, "This is a very exact picture of me. I have all that within me. But I struggle to separate myself from that in myself. It's a very exact portrait."

RW: That's a very interesting story. I was told a story by someone who came to paint my house. His name is Hari. He's a remarkable man himself. His teacher was a Hindu guru. His guru was giving a talk and with a lot of people there and Hari, noticed two men come in the door. He sensed right away that these men were trouble. So he went to the guru and pointed them out and whispered, "They could cause some trouble." The guru saw them and said to Hari something like, "When are you going to learn?" Hari told me his guru went to these two men and talked to them, and even stroked their heads. They just turned into these lambs. Hari said he just couldn't believe it.

JN: It's a good story.

RW: Something was demonstrated.

JN: But you have to be careful sometimes. I remember, I may have told this story before, but I remember standing in a neighborhood that I knew very well and a dog started barking ferociously from across the street and started running at me. I had heard somewhere or believed somewhere that if I just went quiet and was present, the dog wouldn't bother anything. And the dog came over and bit me!

RW: Oh, my gosh.

JN: Not seriously, but it made me realize you've got to discriminate. But nevertheless, to be able to relate personal emotional problems of a human being to the great teaching that perhaps they are involved in, to make the connection so that a person can turn towards that part of the self in moments of emotional difficulty—that must be another kind of transcendent therapy, in a way. It's not that the psychotherapist, the psychiatrist needs to help the person see themselves. But the spiritual therapist probably can help the person become aware of the seer, that which is seeing, and deepen their contact with that which becomes quite another force in one's inner life.

RW: I'm sure that there are amazing things that can happen, especially if the person who is witnessing, who is present to the other, can bring a certain quality of presence and attention, too. We both know this story from a psychiatrist who had a schizophrenic man living in his basement. One day the schizophrenic man pretty much went off the deep end and came upstairs and was very threatening right there in his home. The psychiatrist didn't know what to do. So he simply stood there and looked at this man in a way that was simply seeing him. Something happened there. You know this story.

JN: Yes, I do.

RW: Something was transformed in this troubled man from being seen in this objective way. In fact, there was a profound healing that took place out of this episode. I'm sure there are stories like that, that illustrate, as I say again, that it's really a mysterious thing.

JN: The whole spectrum of therapy, spiritual work from listening as a healing force therapeutically, to listening as a transforming force spiritually. To go from healing the ego enough so that it can submit to another influence. There must be a spectrum of relationship between this quality of attention. In other words, often one needs to have therapy. There are people who need it. I need it. We need it to get through the night and so the ego can function in one's everyday life. The next step is to attend to the seer, because the seer, that which sees can be deepened and deepened and deepened until it becomes a transforming force. And the person goes from being a normal—as Freud said, “All we can do is make a person normally neurotic.” That's because he was very realistic about that. It would take us to the question of what is it when spiritual traditions, real spiritual traditions, real ones, speak of transformation, or of a new birth. It has to do a lot with this, doesn't it? It has to do with this quality of attention being more deep, more involved in one's inner life than one's outer behavior. I am just talking about this whole thing of metanoia and the Christian tradition. You know, the change of consciousness, which is transformation.

RW: Well, I adhere to these ideas that you are expressing. And I still feel myself on this side...

JN: On this side of the river. Me, too.

RW: You know? There's a fellow I interviewed, Jim Barton, an interesting artist. He talked about his demons. He certainly has been through some difficulties. And at some point in the interview, from the way he was speaking, I was beginning to think he was saying that he had gotten beyond his demons. So I said, “It sounds like some of these demons have been vanquished.” And he said, “Oh no. Not at all.” So I asked him what he did about it when he ran up against one of these demons of rage or jealousy or some incredibly powerful emotion. He said, “What I've learned to do is I just go back to work.”

He's a wood carver. I mean this is on a lower level, but I certainly experience art making as a therapeutic process or practice. I find that rather than dwelling on being upset, it's very helpful to get back to work, somehow. So I think what we were talking about is a bit beyond the realm of art per se.

I remember this lecture by Laurens van der Post maybe 35 years ago, an incredible lecture. Laurens van der Post was a wonderful writer and speaker. He was talking about having directed Shakespeare's last play, *The Tempest*. He said that in his opinion, the

theme of Shakespeare's last play was that art could take you only so far. And to go further you have to turn to religion. I know religion nowadays is a word that as soon as people hear it, it's like "Get away from me!" But religion has, in its pure forms, tremendous things to offer us.

Van der Post thought it was interesting that this was Shakespeare's last play. He didn't just die right after he wrote it. He lived a few years afterwards. And I've always pondered that idea, that art can take you so far and if you want to go further, you have to turn to, let's just call it, a spiritual practice. Certainly the things that we were talking about belong in the realm of spiritual practice. I don't want to insist on these categories. Things are fluid and they move and shift around. At one moment something is possible and in another moment that same thing is not possible.

JN: Well, I think it's very right to stay, get back to sea level, as it were—come down from the mountain and see who we really are. If we were to apply the therapy of the artist to get back to work when we are troubled, what would be the equivalent of that? I don't know. Some kind of listening, perhaps even to myself might be the most therapeutic step we could take or listening to another. Sometimes when things are difficult, I turn—sometimes I almost have to force myself—but I've turned to try to see what help I could be to another person.

RW: That's interesting.

JN: That turns, very often that turns the whole thing around.

RW: I am sure that that is an absolutely authentic principle. It's spoken of all the time by people with wisdom. And as you said also, there's something that might come from listening to oneself. I think a basic principle of Buddhism is that our problems stem from ignorance about our true nature.

I had an interesting experience a couple of years ago. I had a beautiful condominium on the coast in Oregon gifted to me for a week. I was going to do some writing and was looking forward to that as an experiment to see if I would come up with anything worthwhile. On the way out of town, about 100 miles up the coast, I got a phone call about a very disturbing problem involving a rental property I own. So I got up to this condominium and found that the owner had these calendars from the Dalai Lama inscribed with pieces of wisdom. One of them said that if someone has done you wrong and behaved in ways that seem completely indefensible, consider that person your great spiritual teacher. This was actually the situation I was in, without going into the details. And I really tried to take that to heart. So then the question is, can I listen to myself deeply enough—because I'm caught up in this intense emotion—is it true that ultimately there is something deeper than this emotion? I mean, basically, the Buddhists are saying that the suffering is due to an ignorance involved there.

JN: Yes, I think there is. That's very beautiful interpretation of the Buddhist idea—to be ignorant of that self inside you in that situation.

RW: It was helpful, even though it wasn't like I was suddenly free from all that.

JN: Not at all. Not at all.

RW: It was very helpful.

JN: It's actually helpful. It's a good note to end on.