

Money and the Meaning of Life

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Spirit of holiness teach us to love; help us to love; guide us to love; help us now to live in pure love. Maybe we should add, “teach us to give,” in keeping with this morning’s theme of money, as we begin our yearly stewardship campaign for the support of our church.

But what are we asking for and who or what is this “spirit of holiness?” It sounds like we’re expecting a lot of help here, but where is that help coming from? Who or what are we asking for help?

In his book, *Money and the Meaning of Life*, Jacob Needleman suggests that the spirit of holiness may well really exist if we could but see it. He agrees with most Unitarian Universalists that traditional concepts of God as an external being “out there” are misleading and outdated. But instead of discarding the project entirely, as do many who call themselves “secular humanists,” he says that, “within ourselves there exists the possibility and even necessity of experiencing and serving something unimaginably great and inconceivably real.”

He points to the ancient teachings that human nature has two aspects. We embody the first aspect when we live and function in the world we see around us – we eat, sleep, produce children, negotiate our social circumstances. This is the world about which Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes, “to be born and die to kill and to heal, to build and destroy, to weep and to laugh, get and lose, keep and cast away,” etc. all under the sun. But the suggestion is that there is something else, something “*above the sun*,” above all that our eyes can see and our mind can name, and there is a higher part of ourselves that senses this and call to us.”

But most of us can not hear or respond to this call because we are so immersed in the first aspect, the world of experiences that we call “real.” So immersed, in fact, that this condition has been referred to as a prison by many teachers of the ages.

Needleman describes this prison. “Imagine . . . a prison where the prisoners do not know or remember the life of freedom outside the walls. All their efforts are spent trying only to better their conditions inside the prison. Those in crowded, dirty, or isolated cells envy other prisoners who have greater privileges. Some decorate the walls of their cells, paint pretty stripes on the bars, without suspecting what these bars are really for.

“This is a very ‘enlightened’ prison. There are recreation facilities, arts and crafts, there is a well-stocked library, . . . There are prison psychiatrists to help the prisoners adapt and adjust. . . Over time, this prison has even evolved to allow political groups and meetings. Philosophers and critics arise among the prisoners to argue for more equality and liberty – within the prison. Honors are handed out, prizes are given, great names are enshrined in the rolls of prison-science, prison-art, prison-morality.

“Occasionally there appears a prisoner – sent from the outside – who speaks clearly and compellingly of a life outside the walls. What becomes of him or her? How is the message received? Sometimes with mockery or hostility.” Sometimes they are banished or killed. . . .

“But sometimes this messenger from outside the walls convinces a few people that another world exists and shows them how to escape. These prisoners begin to understand that the only sensible aim they can have is to escape from the prison and, if possible, help others escape. A special, carefully guarded knowledge circulates among those who have ‘ears to hear.’ ”

Needleman points out that this prison metaphor doesn’t just describe our societies and cultures; it describes our ourselves as well. And the messenger is also dual in nature. There have been enlightened teachers throughout the ages seeking to share this wisdom, but our own lives also include glimpses of “another quality of being, another state of consciousness . . . but our culture does not help us appreciate these glimpses or understand them for what they tell us about our possible moral, mental, and emotional development.”

These glimpses aren’t necessarily part of what we would call “peak experiences,” but they often come to us “in moments of great sorrow or loss, or in

times of extreme physical danger, of profound disappointment, when everything we have relied on is suddenly taken away or lost.

“In such moments,” Needleman says, “an individual *divides into two*. A second self appears and, most often, what it does is *watch*. Only that and nothing more. But it is a watching, a *seeing*, a presence, unlike anything else in our experience; it is an awakening to ourselves of utter lucidity and calm. It is a glimpse of inner freedom completely different from that to which we apply this label in the more familiar experiences of satisfying our desires or ridding ourselves of burdens. In this second seed lies the seed of what in Christianity is called the new, arising from the old, Adam; in the Judaic tradition it is Jacob and Esau, the higher and the lower within us; in Hinduism it is the imperishable atman existing within the mortal ego; in Buddhism it is the Buddha-nature waiting to flash like lightening within the darkness of the illusory sense of self.”

Its appearance doesn't necessarily come with flashing lights and sounding trumpets. I know it didn't for me. The first time I got a clear glimpse of this odd, mysterious part of myself was the first time I got really drunk. It happened when I was fourteen years old.

My sister, Vicki, was five years older than me and had moved into an apartment in the city (well, in Utica, New York). She threw a housewarming party with all her friends and told me I could come too. I was over the moon, invited to a party of nineteen- and twenty-year-old grownups. The drinking age was eighteen back then, and these folks really enjoyed themselves. There was beer, wine, and hard liquor of many kinds. I'd had a few sips of beer before, but never like this. I was blotto.

Things stopped making sense after a certain point as I grew increasingly unable to see straight. I remember brief snapshots now and then, but had no recollection of how I got into the car that was driving me home. I think I was sitting on the floor with my head on the back seat when the strangest thing happened. I was suddenly possessed of a clarity and focus beyond anything I'd ever noticed while sober. From somewhere deep within came the utterly calm lucidity of a presence that was me but wasn't me. I mean, I was a completely drunken teenager

with no control over my body or mind, but from deep inside there emerged a witness, a seeing presence. Not only was that witness not drunk, but it was also unmoved by my condition, even gently compassionate toward it.

It was gone the next morning and I suffered my first (and worst) hangover ever. But I also had the memory of this extraordinary presence deep within. But I had no way to interpret or understand it because our culture didn't recognize it as real.

Needleman describes how our culture misleads us about this. He says that, "Certainly [humankind] has always needed and craved material things. And, certainly, human beings have always suffered from greed. But not every culture or civilization has measured itself principally by the the standard of comfort and safety in the material world.

"We live, then, in a 'wealthy' country – what nowadays has been called an 'affluent society.' This means not only that we have much material wealth, but that we want this wealth more than we want anything else." Needleman claims that "This ordering of priorities has brought our civilization to the brink of ruin. We know that we must find a way out, a way back to values and priorities that represent the real, whole [of human nature]. But all the ways that were once intended to help us find our authentic well-being and our authentic responsibility are themselves deeply stained by the money question. Religion, education, the pursuit of scientific knowledge, medicine, government, as well as most of our day-to-day relationships have all been surrounded and captured by our compulsion for material wealth – and especially our fascination with the instrument we have invented in order to facilitate the acquisition and distribution of wealth, namely, money."

Needleman's analysis continues, suggesting that, rather than being wealthy, we're actually quite poor. He asks, "What does it feel like to be poor? What is the psychological suffering usually associated with poverty? For myself," he says, "I have always pictured poverty as associated with fear and anxiety about the future, fear of abandonment, fear of physical danger, and fear of loneliness. I see the poor as trapped, tense, cunning, harsh. I see them bored, empty of hope, or consumed by absurd fantasies, or drugging themselves with some poison that destroys their

bodies while offering only the relief of temporary oblivion. I see them living and dying like animals. Their lives are the very image of hell.”

Needleman then goes on to explore various images of hell, beginning “with the most obvious and common symbol, unquenchable fire. It is not hard to understand this to mean torture by one’s own desires. A more modern word for this condition is neurosis – a condition in which one is trapped within an endlessly recurring pattern of emotional suffering, where obtaining the apparent object of one’s desire serves only to intensify desire itself. More recently, and more interestingly, the word *addiction* has been used to describe this pervasive psychological suffering. Exactly as one may become addicted to a narcotic like opium or heroin, so we each have our addictive cravings for sex, perhaps, or recognition, or food or clothes or victory or explanations, or any of the countless other things or experiences that form the object of what we call our *emotions*.

He reminds us that when the great teachers of the ages warned us about attachments and desires, they were really talking about these kinds of addiction. They never said that experience or desire was evil in itself. The problem is that “we allow the desires to define our sense of identity.”

Needleman explores various tradition’s images of hell and finds that they all include this loss of freedom and authentic selfhood. He relates the Old Testament idea of hell as Sheol, where “there are no images of raging fire. No caophonous sounds.No sulfurous fumes. Sheol is simply and solely the place of shadows, dark, weak existence, continually fading, ever-paler life. Sheol is the realm of diminishing being. . . the condition of human life proceeding with ever-diminishing human presence. It is the movement toward absence, the movement away from God – for let us carefully note that one of the central definitions of God in the Old Testament is conscious presence. . . . it is the condition of ever-increasing presence from the *I am*, from one’s own conscious presence in the midst of life.” Hell is life without the awareness and participation of the higher self, the part of our self that can include all of our experience within the conscious existential awareness of the great *I am*.

There have been many names for this conscious existential awareness. The Quakers call this the Inner Light, which is the principle that in every human soul

there is implanted a certain element of God's own Spirit and divine energy. This element, known to early Friends as “that of God in everyone”, “the seed of Christ”, or “the seed of Light”, which means in the words of John 1:9, “the true Light, which lighteth every [person] that cometh into the world”. It is conscious awareness itself. Over and beyond whatever is being observed, there is the dispassionate observer, the clear light of awareness itself, just like the observer that emerged within my 14-year-old drunken stupor.

It is in light of this light, this transcendent consciousness that is often called “spirit” or even “holy spirit,” that it makes sense to say that humans are beings “endowed with spirit that flows within a mortal physical body. [We] live in a physical world that is also suffused with spirit. This is [our] metaphysical destiny. [Our] task is to live in direct relationship to both spirit and matter and, in so doing, forge within [ourselves] a new, godlike consciousness known as the *soul*. To this end, [we] must give both spirit and matter their proper due.” From this perspective evil is not a list of bad behaviors, but anything that deludes or tempts us away from a relationship between the higher and lower levels of human nature – between spirit and matter.

And it is in this light that we can begin to see the problem with money. Needleman says, “As an instrument for broadening the passage of material help between human beings – and therefore the range of human love – it was an inspired invention. . . . The exchange of money could serve as a constant reminder of . . . mutual interdependence. In an economy based on need rather than desire, the ‘bottom line’ is more than just an onerous limitation, it is an index for balancing one’s own needs with those of others.”

He explains, “To deal in money in and of itself, with no immediate reference to goods and services, was to run a grave psychospiritual risk. Socially, such an activity cut the flow of human exchange by divorcing money transactions from the world of fundamental human needs.” Separated from any real link with human desire or survival, money takes on all the existential anxieties of our fearful survival-based lower nature. Released from the anchor of simple human-to-human transactions, money becomes an independent symbol and even a powerful force

within the human psyche, absorbing all our fears and leaving us impoverished in spirit.

The bottom line here is that our culture gives money the religious status due to a god. We feel safe if we've got it, we feel anxious if we don't. It is the lifeblood of the invisible prison I mentioned earlier. And it can distract us from becoming aware of the extent of our true dual nature, of the higher self within, which – like all the teachings of the ages claim – is the only true source of peace and fulfillment. As Jesus said, "Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven and all else shall be added to you."

So, then, spirit of holiness, teach us to love, to learn to live in our pure love, teach us to give. This spirit of holiness is the essence of our true higher nature to which we've been blinded. The utterly calm inner observer of all things resides within us; it is the self of our self. Of course our lower, desire and survival-based nature can understand love as desire and attachment and giving as a transaction to get what we want. But the teachers of the ages have always said that there is something more to life; that there is a kind of love that knows no limit; that there is a kind of giving that fulfills us rather than depletes. When we hear its voice and honor its counsel our relationship to love and money is forever changed. Money and its use becomes an expression of our primary values, of our relationships and interdependence with one another and our planet. Money can become an agent of personal and societal transformation instead of just being the means of exchange within a prison of self-involved delusion.

As you consider your pledge to support this Beloved Community for the coming year, I invite you to hear and honor the voice of the spirit of love that whispers deep within your heart and let it teach you money's true value and the deeper meaning of giving.

May it be so.