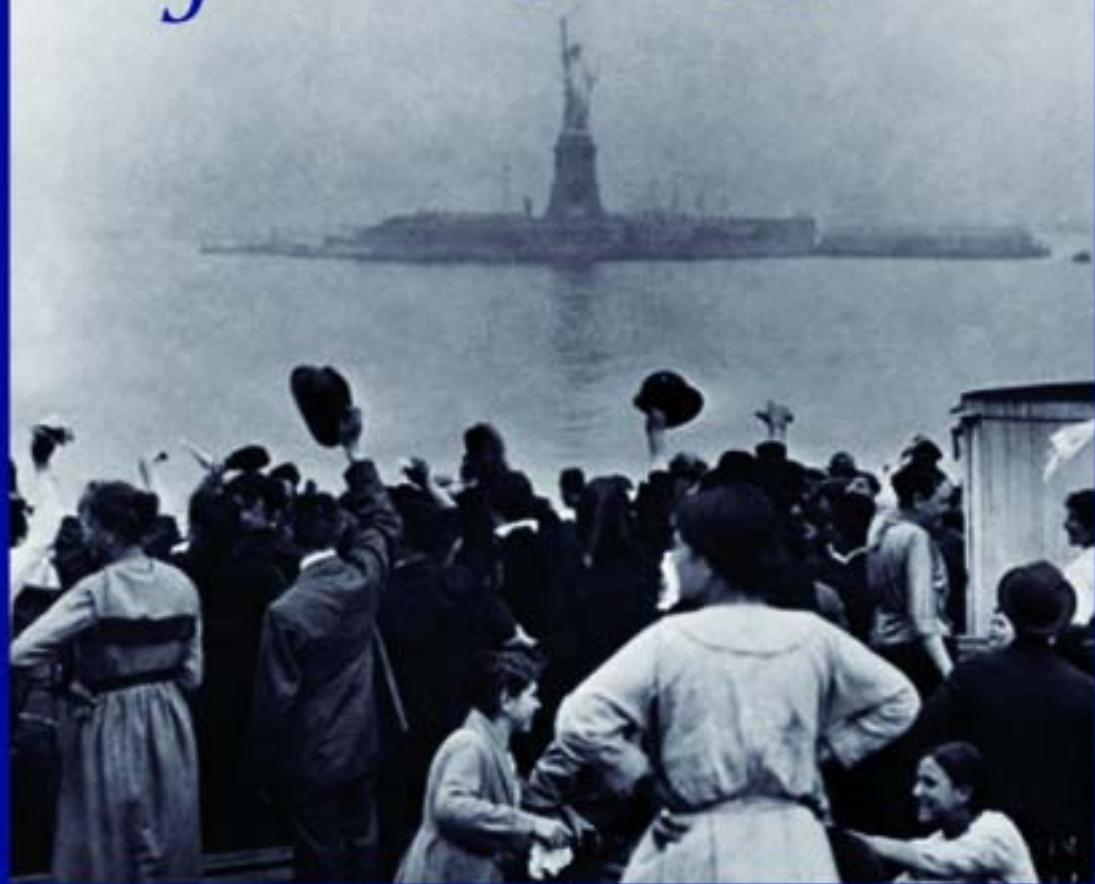


Jacob Needleman



Two Dreams of America



Essays on Deepening the American Dream
SPONSORED BY THE FETZER INSTITUTE

*Two Dreams
of America*

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Essays on Deepening the American Dream

A SERIES SPONSORED BY THE FETZER INSTITUTE

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Preface

*Sowing the Seeds of
a National Conversation*

DURING THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES, many observers of our culture have suggested that faith in the American dream is dying, that a collective vision of hope for the future is fading from view. It has taken a series of national crises—placing us all in direct awareness of our own vulnerability and mortality—to awaken us to the truth that the American dream is not dying, but deepening. Recognition of this truth has never been more essential as we struggle to respond with compassionate strength to the events of September 11, 2001, and its aftermath.

The Fetzer Institute's project on Deepening the American Dream began in 1999 to explore the relationship between the inner life of spirit and the outer life of service. Through commissioned essays and in dialogue with such writers as Huston Smith, Jacob Needleman, Gerald May, Cynthia Bourgeault, Kathleen Norris, Robert Inchausti, Carolyn Brown, Elaine Pagels, Parker Palmer, and others, we are learning a great deal about the intrinsic nature of this human relationship. These essays describe some of the ways in which attention to this relationship (in communities and nations as well as individuals) does invariably lead to more compassionate and effective action in the world. What's more, each in its own way illuminates the essential qualities of the common man and woman—the global citizen—who seeks to live with the authenticity and grace demanded by our times.

In the 1960s, during another challenging period in our nation's history, the poet Langston Hughes observed that the origin of a deeper American dream is not to be found in some distant, abstract idea but very near, in the story of our own lives. It is, as he wrote:

An ever-living seed,
Its dream
Lies deep in the heart of me.

The deepening we seek can be found in our own hearts, if only we have the courage to read what is written there.

ROBERT F. LEHMAN
Chair of the Board
Fetzer Institute

The Deepening the American Dream Series

Fetzer Institute's project on Deepening the American Dream began in 1999 to explore the relationship between the inner life of spirit and the outer life of service. Through commissioned essays and in dialogue with such writers as Huston Smith, Jacob Needleman, Gerald May, Cynthia Bourgeault, Kathleen Norris, Robert Inchausti, Carolyn Brown, Elaine Pagels, Parker Palmer, and others, the project is beginning to sow the seeds of a national conversation. With the publication of this inaugural essay, the thinking and writing coming from these gatherings is being offered in a series of publications sponsored by Fetzer Institute in partnership with Jossey-Bass. The essays and individual volumes and anthologies to be published will explore and describe the many ways, as individuals and communities and nations, that we can illuminate and inhabit the essential qualities of the global citizen who seeks to live with the authenticity and grace demanded by our times.

TWO DREAMS OF AMERICA

Jacob Needleman

1. Statement of the Question

Both in its everyday usage and in its etymology, the word *dream* includes two radically opposed meanings and points in two radically opposed directions of human life. A dream is a vision of truth, of what can be and ought to be; it shapes our fundamental intention and purpose; it calls us to the life we are meant to live and the good we are meant to serve. Such is Jacob's dream (Genesis 28) in which he is given to see the entire cosmic order with God above commanding and promising him the fullness of a sacred life on earth.

And a dream is a deception, a night creature of mere seeming; or a daylight phantom that draws us away from the reality of the present moment, idling the engines of our psyche and spirit in imagined pleasures or terrors. Worse yet, a dream is an illusion masquerading as a vision, as when we say of someone that his or her goals are "only a dream." Not only individuals, but groups and collectivities, including nations and even whole civilizations, may come under the sway of such dreams. History offers many examples—too many. We need only look at the bloody tracks of our era's dreams of national, racial, or religious superiority; or its sometimes hypnotic submission to economic and scientific ideologies—all fueled by the suggestibility of the crowd. And if we turn further back in history or look toward other cultures throughout the world, we will be astonished at the spectacle of the fantastic dreams that have dominated the minds of the peoples of the earth, dreams that lie at the root of the universal plague of war.



Then, what of the American dream? Is it a vision or an illusion? Do we need to deepen this dream or awaken from it?

Can anyone doubt the importance of this question? In one form or another, it is a question that has been gathering strength for decades, and it now stands squarely in the path not only of every American, but, such is the planetary influence of America, of every man and woman in the world. What really *is* America? What does America *mean*?

To think well and truly about this question, we need to relate it to the deepest inner questions that mankind can ask. Because, in our bones, we know this is no longer—if, in fact, it ever was—only an external issue, unrelated to our inmost yearning to understand the sense and purpose of human life itself, the sense and purpose of our own life and death. In our bones, we know that we do not wish to feed on illusions either of a “patriotism” that sets us against or above the rest of the human race, or a “realism” that denies the ideals of America, ideals which in their essence reflect something of what can be called the universal, eternal vision of what it means to be *fully human*.

Deep within ourselves we know we do not wish to dream our life away; we wish for truth, not “truth”; we wish for freedom, not “freedom”; we wish for an independence that enables us to serve and obey what is greater than ourselves, not an “independence” that is little more than an adolescent fantasy of power or a nightmarish cosmic isolation. Truth, freedom, independence: yes, these are among our most treasured American values, but America did not invent them. Their source lies far back in time, deep within the heart and spirit of mankind’s great spiritual traditions. It is America, however, that once brought hope to the world by injecting these values into the lifeblood of modern society.

Even to begin to put our question in these terms, undefined as they yet may be, is to be thrown a lifeline. Can we take hold of it? Can we ponder what it really means that the values we associate with America originally reflected aspects of an ancient, timeless wisdom?—that it is in this context that we may rediscover the American dream considered as a vision of truth? And yet, at the same time, can we recognize that at any moment the place of these values may be invaded by counterfeits bearing the same names and wearing the same colors? How to understand that in order to deepen the American dream, it is first of all necessary to awaken from the American dream?

In order to remember the vision of America, we need to free ourselves from the illusion of America. This will require of us at least an honest,

first-hand approach to the inner, *metaphysical* dimension of our American values—for it is in this dimension that the vision is rooted. And it is this dimension that it is necessary to recover and hold onto. Without it, the vision inevitably decays into illusion: ideas and words that were once life-giving and full of hope inevitably become fantasies that mask our ignorance of ourselves and of the kind of work that is actually required of us.

At the same time, it will be necessary to keep our feet on the ground and try to bear in mind what nations really are, including America, and in what rough-and-tumble world they are obliged to act. Without including this element in our inquiry, we run the risk of falling prey to another kind of illusion: a misplaced spirituality that regards nations as though they were persons, and which holds the American nation to standards of behavior that we ourselves, as individuals, do not and—as we are—cannot live up to. Or, what is equally fantastic, which regards America as a holy community obliged to act selflessly and meekly in the jungle of the world it lives in—like a community of saints or spiritual aspirants. At the same time, in order to face this whole issue squarely, we will have to consider that a genuine spiritual community cannot exist in the world as we know it apart from a larger environment of favorable political and social conditions. And, considering this, we may come to the conclusion that one of the great purposes of the American nation is to shelter and guard the rights of all men and women to seek the conditions and the companions necessary for the inner search.

2. The Two Dreams of America

It is tempting to take the next step of our inquiry by making a sharp and sharply judgmental distinction between the materialist and the idealist goals of the American people. The “American dream” in its familiar, cliché-ridden forms could then safely be relegated to the realm of illusion or, at least, superficiality. We all know the words associated with this version of the dream: wealth, success, unlimited social and entrepreneurial mobility, material comfort—even to the point of specifying some of the exact economic parameters: a house of one’s own, maybe two nice cars, two nice, well-educated children, and so on. One would certainly wish to deepen this version of the dream by turning to the ideals of brotherhood, equality, and the Bill of Rights. But, in the last analysis, so a critic might suggest, these ideals themselves have now become largely instrumental—so many means for securing material gain and for lubricating the machinery of American capitalism. What were once moral principles, considered

as ultimate ends, for which material security was but a means, have been turned around to become tools of the American illusion of materialist happiness.

There is an obvious truth in this view, and in a sense it is one of the most fundamental criticisms that can be made of the American dream. But we must proceed with caution. To distinguish between the two dreams of America, the illusion and the vision, may not be so simple a matter as to label the one materialistic and the other spiritual or ethical. Certainly, the great wisdom teachings of the world invite us to think more carefully about this distinction than many of us are prone to do.

To illustrate the need for a more careful examination of this distinction, and by way of introducing into our discussion some necessary aspects of the world's wisdom traditions, I would like to call upon two immigrants to America, both men of exceptional education and acumen. The first, Dr. Carlo Brumat, is Italian by birth, trained in science and business management, a man of phenomenal cultural breadth and academic expertise cutting across science, mathematics, the humanities, and the social sciences. I had come to know him when he was the visionary dean of an innovative school of business leadership in Monterrey, Mexico. The second is Ghulam Taymuree, formerly professor of technological engineering at Kabul University. He and his family left Afghanistan for America just after the Soviet invasion in 1981 and now, with his brothers, he runs a successful automobile repair business in Oakland, California.

Dr. Brumat is a tall, powerfully built man in his sixties, a modern Renaissance man if ever there was one. Educated in physics and mathematics at UCLA, he lived for many years in America and speaks and—if one may say it—thinks and feels almost like an American. Except when he is speaking his native Italian, when his Americanness is completely absorbed into the being of a pure northern Italian; or when he is speaking flawless Spanish, French, German, when he becomes a uniquely cosmopolitan and gracious Mexican, Parisian, or German. His voice is strong and warm, but it can hardly keep up with the speed of his mental associations and the vigor of his physical gestures.

In almost every respect, Ghulam Taymuree seems the exact opposite of Carlo Brumat, not only physically and in his personality, but in his relationship to the American dream. Slightly built and soft-spoken, he stays contained in his own atmosphere, and he gestures not with his arms or hands, but only with his clear, dark eyes.

Taken together, these two men, both of whom love America (although Dr. Brumat might resist this characterization), articulate and even incar-

nate what it is necessary for us to understand about the American dream as both vision and illusion.

Carlo Brumat

On Saturday, March 20, 2001, in Monterrey, Mexico, Dr. Brumat and I were seated in front of a large-screen television waiting for the inauguration of George W. Bush. We were good-naturedly arguing about America, as we often did, but now more intensely than usual as the noon hour in Washington approached.

After the inaugural speech was finished and as Dr. Brumat and I sat down to lunch, I remarked to him how both our attitudes had changed midway through the speech. We had both been laughing at this or that, anticipating some of the President's notorious gaffes or malapropisms when, at a certain moment, we both sat up a little straighter and began to pay serious attention.

"What was it that suddenly interested you?" I asked. "We were both surprised by the speech; it was much better than either of us expected, wasn't it?"

"Yes," he said, "I thought the speech was effective—except, of course, for those parts that seemed to imply that freedom and liberty are an American monopoly. That irritated me, because it is actually wrong and stupid, historically and anthropologically."

He went on:

"Americans don't seem to know their own history. If you go back to Jefferson, for example, you can clearly see the sources from which he received his ideas. These aspirations—freedom, liberty—are aspirations of the human animal; they are universal, or nearly so. So why do Americans believe they have invented them?"

"But, what I liked about the speech was that he tried to convey a more balanced ethos, bringing in the community and the ideal of compassion, and not hitting so hard on the individualistic ethos, which is said to be one of the characteristics of the American—I mean, Americans are supposed to be individuals who think for themselves. By the way, I would say that is a great illusion. I find Americans, on the average, the least politicized and hence the most easily manipulated individuals that I have ever met—certainly, more so than any European that I can think of."

He paused for a moment, scanning my face, and then continued:

"On the other hand, I think the individual American, if you abstract from his naïveté, is, well generally, *nicer* than the average European. As a

neighbor, it's probably better to have an American neighbor; he will come over when you arrive there—that was my experience, and I know many others who have experienced the same thing. They would come and say, is there anything I can do to help you; and they would actually mean it. This I ascribe partly to the experience of the frontier. From the very beginning, the vast openness of the frontier has deeply shaped the American character. You went where few people were, and you had to rely on each other and help each other. So, I would say that, as individuals, Americans tend to be nicer. Not as deep, sometimes, but what stands out is the *good will* of the average American.

“It's America as a corporate entity that constitutes the problem. To a large extent, it's the frontier mentality again, but on a corporate scale, where it eventually becomes destructive. Almost from the very beginning, the need and the possibility of constant expansion defined America economically, socially, and politically—as well as psychologically on an individual basis.

“Frederick Jackson Turner¹ saw this very clearly. He showed that America was a society needing constant expansion. And now this constant expansion can only be gained by intruding into the lives of other people—into their countries, sometimes in a purely territorial sense, but also economically through the American form of capitalism, and into the minds of other peoples, through the media . . .”

There followed a discussion of other forms of capitalism, such as the so-called “Rhine model” in Germany, that, according to Brumat, are more socially stable and contained. The American version, however, is now dominating the world. Germany, for example, is being forced by the conditions created by America to abandon its more moderated form of corporate capitalism.

“This is one of the main features of what is called globalization. America is imposing the rules and other countries, in order to stay competitive, have to play by these rules, which ultimately means surrendering aspects of their culture that make them less ‘efficient’ than the workaholic American society.” He compared this worldwide phenomenon to how the ancient Athenians for a short while dominated their world, citing Thucydides in the famous passage from the Melian Dialogue. In the year 421 B.C. sharply militant factions came to power in Athens and initiated an expansionistic, imperialistic policy. An expedition was sent to annex the neutral Dorian island of Melos.

¹ See his groundbreaking essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.”

“In that passage, as you know, the inhabitants of the island refuse to join Athens. They want to remain neutral in the war between Athens and Sparta and they say, ‘But, we’ll fight you if we have to, and we think the gods will be on our side because ours is the just cause.’”

“And you know what the Athenian ambassador says to this?” Brumat’s shoulders rose and his hands opened upward in the universal Mediterranean gesture of disingenuousness: “The Athenian says: ‘Well, it’s your privilege to fight of course. But you already know what’s going to happen if you do try to fight us. And, as far as we’re concerned, we don’t think the gods are more likely to be on your side than on our side. Because, from what we know and have observed, the same law rules among the gods as down here.’”

He paused for a moment, his lips curled in a devilish smile:

“‘And the law is simple,’ the Athenian says: *‘the strong exact what they can and the weak yield what they must.’*”

We both laughed, but my laughter was a bit forced. I couldn’t let the matter end there. That could not be all there was to Dr. Brumat’s attitude toward America. He was too much of an American himself. Also, I knew him well enough to know that however aggressively he made his points, he was always surprisingly open to opposing views. I felt, perhaps foolishly or jingoistically, that the European in him asserted, but the American listened. Over the years, all our arguments about America had led me to the conviction that he was at least as idealistic about America as I was, but that in a certain way, he was personally *hurt* by what he saw as America’s crimes and betrayals of its own ideals—almost like a disappointed lover.

“All right,” I said, finally, “let me ask you a simple question. What does America *mean* to you? What does it stand for? As an ideal? How do you look at the fact America was once—and for many people still is—the hope of the world, with its ideals of freedom and liberty?”

He replied very quickly, and sharply:

“Well, I think, by actual observation, in actual *fact*, America is the land of the *economic* refugees of the world.

“Certainly, in some cases, but by no means the majority, it has also been the home, the last refuge, the shelter, of the religiously or politically persecuted—like the Jews in Europe or some from Asia and other countries, and, obviously, in its origins, the religiously persecuted from England. But for the legions of Latin Americans, southern Italians and Poles, and so on, who have gone to America, and who keep going to America, I don’t think they give a damn about the symbols of freedom and democracy, and so on. They don’t even believe that, in terms of these things, America offers them anything more than they could find at home. That

doesn't really come into their minds. *But they are sure that in America they can get a better material life.* That's my sense.

"And in all my observations—not a huge sample, maybe a hundred or so immigrants from different countries—I never once heard anyone praising American liberty and democracy or such things. I always heard people saying, 'You know, here in America I have a Lincoln Continental, I have a swimming pool—you think I could have had this sort of thing in Naples? Certainly not!'

"Not once, not even one person ever said anything like 'I have come here because this is the land of freedom.' Not once did I ever hear that. And so, generalizing from this negative result, based on a small sample, I would say simply that most people come to America seeking only a better material life. And it's not just material *things* that they want; it's the whole 'social clarity,' so to say, of the materialism that permeates American culture, where everyone says 'How much is he worth? How much are you worth?' This is not a sentence you would hear in any other language. Americans don't want to hear, 'I'm a virtuous man, I'm self-realized, I'm very much aware of myself, I know myself.' No, they want to hear how many million dollars you have in the bank.

"The American dream? You know, in America the possibility of getting rich is very real, relatively easy. Not that everyone makes it, of course, but the very possibility—and all the new wealth that results from it—constitutes a constant reminder for everyone that they can and should try. So, there is constantly this focus on striving and trying to achieve. In other countries, where the socio-economic stratification has long been more rigid, people come to accept their station in life more easily. . . ."

The conversation led through many qualifications about America and about the values of other nations and cultures. I agreed that many, if not most, immigrants had always come to America for economic reasons, but it seemed to me that, whatever their motives, they bring youth, vitality, difference. They create a flow in and out of our borders that is an essential element in America's feeling of youth and vastness—the openness of its spaces and its economy. And as for American capitalism, it will probably never be tempered by European-style capitalism. I proposed that the economic and physical spaciousness of America is a metaphor for the spiritual and experiential spaciousness that foreigners also encounter in it. We are the land of the misfit; people travel in and out of our borders, and crisscross our enormous nation looking to become themselves. They think they are finding swimming pools, but they are feeding something in our nation, contributing to a renewing flow that we live within. They bring balance—as well as the renewal of American values due to their often

strong ethical and family traditions. Even the most materialistic of these immigrants sooner or later may began to sense, maybe not even consciously, something deeper about what America was meant to stand for.

In any case, by the time our discussion ended, we had reached what was for me a remarkable and unexpected opening to the visionary aspect of the American dream. And it came from the lips of Dr. Brumat himself.

But first we need to hear from Ghulam Taymuree.

Ghulam Taymuree

My first serious conversation with Ghulam Taymuree took place at his automobile repair shop some ten days after September 11th. Up until then our exchanges were mainly about my car, and only incidentally about his interest in philosophy and spiritual ideas. However, I always came away from him feeling I had been with a man of uncommon depth. And as far as his acquaintance with philosophy is concerned, the range and sophistication of the books that jammed his office and crowded his desk could give points to the personal library of any established scholar in the field.

The San Francisco Bay Area is home to the nation's largest population of Afghan immigrants, and after September 11th there had been stories of mindless attacks on Afghan businesses and storekeepers. My wife and I went to visit him and his brothers at their shop in order to see how they were and to show support for them. We were relieved to see that all was well, and as we were returning to our car, Mr. Taymuree started spontaneously to speak to us about America. We stopped and listened to him for a long time without interrupting, astonished at the depth and quiet power of his feeling for America and what it means. A few weeks later, I returned for the express purpose of listening to him further.

With consummate courtesy he led me up the stairs to his office, an austere furnished private room from which I was looking down through a large window at the repair shop below, without hearing much of the noise. Once or twice during the conversation we were interrupted by one of his brothers putting to him some question or other in their native Dari, but apart from that, and apart from my being always peripherally aware of the bustling activity below, the room was like a sanctuary.

He began by speaking of his life before emigrating to America. He grew up in a small, "primitive" village seventy miles north of Kabul along the one road that connected Kabul to northern Afghanistan. He spoke of the elders who governed the village, the orchards, the "schoolroom" that was nothing more than a cave or else only a space under a tree—and how, by a stroke of chance, he happened to come in contact with the first American

ever to spend a night in an Afghan village. The American—"someone from the embassy"—was passing through on his way to Bamiyan to see the Buddhist statues that were later destroyed by the Taliban.

"The American happened to leave behind a pamphlet—whether accidentally or intentionally I don't know—that had on it the words, 'government of the people, by the people and for the people.' I was fourteen or fifteen years old and I remember staring at those words, sensing that there was something very important in them. But I could not understand it. How could it be? I was a subject—we were all subjects under a king. I could not make out the meaning of those words."

When he was twenty years old, his intellectual abilities brought him a special scholarship enabling him to study in America.

"So I came to America for the first time in 1954. It was in America that I first sensed what it means to be an individual, what it means to be free, what it means to have the possibility of making your own choice. Of course, I did not understand it fully then—the contrast was so great between Afghanistan and America; but I could see that difference in each particular person and in their movement. I mean by movement that you could go anyplace, night or day. Of course, these are things that every American takes for granted. Americans take it all for granted. They just do what they want and go where they want. They don't really feel what it means. But I was astonished. I was deeply astonished."

I asked Mr. Taymuree to explain more about what this freedom of movement means to him. After thinking for a moment, he surprised me by connecting what he called America's "freedom of movement" with the mind, with a certain *energy* of the human psyche. He made this connection by telling me about the first philosophy classes he took in the United States.

"I found the key there that opens the door to humanness, to full humanness. The uncaptured, the *siege* idea."

I looked at him, puzzled. He repeated himself: "The *siege* idea."

"*Seed?*" I asked. I had no idea what he was talking about.

"*Siege,*" he said, "not captured yet. *Siege.*"

"Ah! You mean as in an attack, a *siege* upon a city or a castle."

"Yes," he answered, "the mind, the thinking, the searching that is not yet captured. When it is captured, it becomes something defined, it becomes science, it becomes this or that, it becomes practical disciplines, technology, whatever."

He leaned forward, as it were, with his eyes.

"But *before* that, it is pure *movement*. . . . You could call it vision . . . a grasping toward the whole scheme of creation . . . the attraction toward

Being—that is what I understood from philosophy: what lies inside, deep inside the mind of man—*that's* the thing, that's the sacred essence of the mind of man, that's the movement of freedom.”

At that point, without any suggestion of abruptness, he turned the conversation in another direction.

“When I came to this country, I had already read everything I could about the history of my own country, about Islam in all its aspects, and I had read a great deal about Christianity, Judaism—all that. But in America I found what was, to my mind, the quintessential statement about humanness in the sacred document framed by the Founding Fathers of the United States. To my mind, I think they have gone into the depths of history with an unparalleled vision and understanding. There—throughout history—they saw the facts, the strata, of humanness appearing here and there and then disappearing. Like geologists, like anthropologists, the Founding Fathers (certainly drawing also on Locke and others from England)—they had apprehended all this and put it in a frame, under a single proposition . . .” He paused for a moment and said in a passionate whisper: “‘Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’”

The quiet way he spoke, the flame in his eyes, his vibrantly still, small body seeming to gather light all around him, made this single phrase—so familiar, so cliché-ridden for most of us—suddenly spring to life. I think I can say I actually *heard* it for the first time. And I began to realize that to deepen the American dream meant to hear it, feel it in a deeper part of oneself! It was not simply a matter of new insights exactly, or of connecting American values with the formulations of the ancient wisdom teachings. Or, rather, yes, it *was* necessary to bring new language and new wisdom into the statement of American ideas, but only for the purpose of allowing them to enter into us more deeply. And, of course, it is this process of offering conditions under which men and women can listen to truth, which lies at the real root of the methods and formulations of the great practical spiritual traditions, and which has been lost in the modern world. True esotericism is nothing if it is not a way of communicating truth that enables it to be heard and freely accepted in the depth of man's heart and mind. This is the compassion of great wisdom, without which it can actually set human beings against each other under the angry light of self-righteousness, no matter how exquisitely articulated it may be. All of which is only to say that deepening the American dream and awakening from the American dream converge beyond the horizon: it means to rescue the idea of America from its “capture” at the surface of our selves, where we are lost in imagination, and to let it enter once again into the truer self that is always calling to us.

Mr. Taymuree continued:

“Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—unalienable rights. This is not just the American dream, it’s the dream of all human beings. But this *unalienable* right—this right can quickly be taken away, in all of history it has so often been taken away.”

Again, he paused, his body perfectly still, his eyes glowing.

“The first one, *life*: not biological life, yes it can be taken away, but it appears again from here and there and there . . . but the second part of the proposition, *liberty*: the whole of our humanness, the whole of what distinguishes us from animals, all our separation from natural life. Liberty, to me, *includes* freedom of choice, political freedom, moral freedom—well, all of that is in its essence, in its reality, when it is real, when it is not just words, when it is deep—it is of the essence of the human mind, the human soul, the uncaptured mind. All *that* is very vulnerable, delicate, fragile, difficult to preserve—like an orchid, it needs certain conditions, a certain ambience, very, very precise conditions, so fragile that if we do *anything*, if we change *any* little bit of it—well, it’s like the wing of an eagle: even if you cut even a little part of that wing, you limit the height that the eagle can fly.

“I realized that after the Soviet invasion and before coming to America I had become a kind of zombie. What do I mean by that? I mean that I had become deprived of the freedom of the mind, the freedom of imagination. For someone like myself who comes to America this is a new discovery, this is infinitely precious, this is sacred. I have lived through the history of governments—monarchy, communism; I’ve witnessed many atrocities, I’ve been caught in cross fires, I’ve seen children destroyed; I’ve seen homes destroyed. I’ve experienced all of it.

“But what may be the most difficult thing for Americans to understand is that we could not trust ourselves to speak our mind, and finally not even to think. We acquired a robotic nature, we were deprived of what makes us human beings, fully human beings.

“That is what America gives—the possibility of becoming full human beings. That is why I came here; I see that here my grandchildren have the possibility of realizing their humanity.”

3. Deepening “the Pursuit of Happiness”

The key to our question is here before us: *to deepen the American dream it is necessary to deepen our understanding of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”* We need to hear it again as though for the first time, not just once, but permanently. We need to become “as little children” in front of such ideas, to become as men and women who have never heard

it before, who have lived their lives in subjection to a despotism of the mind and heart, in which freedom as an *inner fact*, and not just as a word or concept, is actually an unknown reality—not political freedom only, but metaphysical freedom, the opening to the uncaptured mind. To experience this reality it is necessary to awaken to a part of the psyche that sees and feels truth directly and sees and feels the good directly—from within our inmost self, the real self that is a particle of the great Self that the Founders sometimes called “the God of Nature and of Man,” and which is accessible to us through the activity of what they called *Reason*.

Here let us proceed cautiously. We are trying to approach what may be for us an entirely new understanding of the idea of America, but one which, when we really can hear it, may also strike us as mysteriously familiar, as something we of course knew all along, but have somehow and somewhere mysteriously and tragically forgotten—just as we have mysteriously and tragically forgotten what we really are. We are speaking of *the sleep of America* as an echo of the sleep of man—and of the dreams that visit us in that sleep and which keep us from awakening, as individuals first and then as a society.

We are trying to discover precisely why the pursuit of happiness has decayed; why it has passed from a vision into a phantasm—and even into a nightmare—and what, precisely, is required of us in order to awaken from the fantasy, not just in words, but as a concretely lived fact. We are going to discover that the vision of the Founders may be seen as rooted in an astonishing and timeless truth about man: namely, that *the essence of man is happiness and love* and that this essence is meant to serve the highest reality (call it “God”) by serving one’s neighbor. In a word, human happiness is literally—*chemically*—inseparable from caring for others. Man is built to serve, he is built to give. Anything pointing away from that truth is, for man, the path to “hell.” And anything approaching it is the path to “heaven.”

This is an ancient doctrine reaching far, far back into the roots of all wisdom and revelation: the essential self of man in all its uncaptured freedom and energy radiates compassion and devotion and moral power. The fall of man, his “ignorance” or—in Western terms—his “sin,” covers over this intrinsic goodness to the point that the human condition seems hopeless. But however hopeless it seems, the truth is that there is, as Jefferson and the greatest philosophers of the Enlightenment saw, an uncorrupted core in the human essence, uncorrupted and uncorruptible—it is “the substance of the divinity” and hence a diamond stronger than any force “under the sun.” But it is so covered over, so encrusted with illusion and violent fear, so imprisoned by the resisting forces of the world’s

egoism (“evil”), that man, to all appearances, and even for all practical purposes, seems no more than (in Emerson’s phrase) “a god in ruins” or, perhaps worse, a tortured fruit of animal evolution possessing and possessed by an enormous and dysfunctional brain.

To put it in its simplest terms: the authentic pursuit of happiness is the pursuit neither of physical nor social pleasure, nor of both together. Happiness for man consists in serving the good, which means awakening to that in oneself which can freely obey a higher law and translate it into action for the welfare of others. Such awakening is in itself a joy *beyond the pleasure principle*, compared to which what is usually called happiness is actually a disguised form of anguish, the tortured “happiness” of alternating craving and surfeit that characterizes the uneducated physical body and the unmastered egoism of our illusory sense of self.



Lest it be objected that we are trying to import alien ideas into the thought of the Founders, we need now to take a passing glance at how Jefferson and the philosophy of the Enlightenment that he drew upon spoke of human happiness. It may be that some of us will find the language of the Enlightenment overfamiliar or perhaps even sterile, due largely to a political and academic “colonization” that has sealed off its potential spiritual resonance. This sense of overfamiliarity of the founding language of America is surely a sign of how far the American dream (vision) of Jefferson and the Founders has decayed into the American dream (illusion) of happiness as sharply characterized by our Dr. Brumat—the new car, the new house, the status, and all that goes with it—the vulgarity, the images of violence we feed our children and ourselves, the endless acceleration of buying and selling that permeates our every day and hour and steals from us the lived reality of time itself. We need to retrieve the life of this language that has shaped so much that is good in America.

We need to liberate the American philosophical language. We are not going to permit the Founders’ words to remain static or to be understood simply in the old way that has bred such philosophical and existential decay. We are going to let their words breathe new life and sound new (and deeply ancient) echoes of the great vision of what man is and can become. But to move in this direction, we need, above all, to remember that *we cannot perceive Truth with the false part of ourselves*. This is the great lesson that we must take from our own immigrant heart, our Ghulam Taymuree: it is only from beneath the surface of ourselves that we can see, sense, and feel what lies beneath the surface of the American dream.

“Only the real can perceive the real.”



Here, then, is Jefferson articulating the ancient teaching of the convergence of happiness and virtue. Listen first to his characterization of moral sentiment, or conscience, as intrinsic to the structure of human nature:

The moral sense, or conscience, is as much a part of man as his leg or arm. It is given to all human beings in a stronger or weaker degree, as force of members is given them in a greater or less degree. It may be strengthened by exercise, as may any particular limb of the body. This sense is submitted, indeed, in some degree, to the guidance of reason; but it is small stock which is required for this: even a less one than what we call common sense. State a moral case to a ploughman and a professor. The former will decide it as well, and often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules. In this branch, therefore, read good books, because they will encourage, as well as direct your feelings.²

Conscience, then, is not a socially conditioned power, although conditions of the social order can either obstruct or support its action in the individual. Conscience is inborn, but we can and must work to “strengthen” it—that is, to allow it to be heard. Such thoughts cannot but remind us of the age-old teaching that it is obedience to conscience that constitutes true human happiness. But, there is more. It is also obedience to conscience that constitutes true human freedom. Here is Jefferson commenting on the education of children in *Notes on the State of Virginia*:

The first elements of morality . . . may be instilled in their minds; such as, when further developed as their judgments advance in strength, may teach them how to work out their own greatest happiness, by shewing them that it does not depend on the condition of life in which chance has placed them, but is always the result of a good conscience, good health, occupation, and freedom in all just pursuits.³

² Jefferson to Peter Carr, 10 August 1787, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 20 vols., Eds. Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh, Washington, D.C.: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903, 6:257–58.

³ *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Ed. William Peden, New York: Norton, 1972. cited in Allen Jayne, *Jefferson's Declaration of Independence*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 1998, p. 134.

As Allen Jayne points out in his excellent study of the Declaration of Independence,⁴ “by defining freedom as ‘freedom in all just pursuits . . .,’ Jefferson was emphasizing that freedom was license to do not anything at all to attain one’s ‘greatest happiness’ but only what was consistent with the moral sense of justice.”

In this vein, it is important to note, as Jayne also points out, that the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment (Frances Hutcheson and Lord Kames being chief among them) stressed just this same vision of the convergence of “moral sense” and individual, human happiness. And it was, apparently, just these philosophers who, along with Locke and Bolingbroke, exercised the greatest philosophical influence upon Jefferson as he drafted the Declaration of Independence. Referring, perhaps, to what he had learned from his much admired Scottish mentors and drawing, certainly, on his readings in the literature of antiquity and his own reflections, he writes: “And if the Wise be the happy man, as these sages say, he must be virtuous too; *for, without virtue, happiness cannot be.*”⁵

And further: “We believed . . . that man was a rational animal, endowed by nature with rights and with an innate sense of justice; and that he could be restrained from wrong and protected in right, by moderate powers confided to persons of his own choice, and held to their duties by dependence on their own will.”⁶

The sociopolitical implications of this view of the convergent relationship between happiness, virtue and the ultimate authority of innate individual “moral sense,” and democracy are, of course, immense. It is the philosophical and anthropological ground upon which America bases its rejection of the imposed political, intellectual, and spiritual authority of monarchs and priests of all kinds. But it is a view that is also fraught with peril. Is it a license for individual subjectivism and, ultimately, relativism in our ethical, mental, and social life? Is it an invitation for the authority of the herd?—the “morality” conditioned mainly by external suggestion (for example, the psychoanalytic “super-ego”), the pseudoconscience manipulated by demagoguery, dogma, or media; the mass morality, the mass vulgarity, and, finally, the mass prejudice, fear, and violence that is, of all causal agencies within human nature, surely the chief cause of the horrors of war?

⁴ Allen Jayne: *Jefferson's Declaration of Independence*, p. 135.

⁵ Jefferson to Amos J. Cook, 21 January 1816, in *Writings* (Lipscomb and Bergh), 14:405. emphasis mine.

⁶ Jefferson to William Johnston, 12 June 1823, in *Writings* (Lipscomb and Bergh), 15:440.

Is all of this what necessarily follows from affirming the primacy of individual conscience in the conduct of life? Certainly not—and to regard it in this way would be to degrade the American vision of the primacy of conscience into a dangerous illusion. It would be to assume that conscience is simply a 24-carat word for whatever we happen to feel is good or bad, which in turn becomes whatever we happen to like or dislike, no matter what the source, inner or outer, of these impulses. And such a view, when rendered more sophisticated by refined philosophical technique or *a priori* political agendas of one kind or another, degrades the idea of conscience into the fundamental human illusion of moral self-righteousness—in Judeo-Christian terms, *pride*; in the language of the East, *ignorance*. And this is to deny the heart of all the great wisdom teachings of the world and also our own moral common sense. But, it should be added, it is also to step onto ground that is close to if not in certain respects identical with much of what is now known as postmodernism or deconstructionism which, without authentic metaphysical *re*-constructionism, leaves us in a wasteland of subjective indeterminism, that is, the intellectual and moral dream (illusion) that freedom equals obeying *no* objective laws. In fact, this condition of “freedom” as absence of submission to objectively higher laws is precisely the chaos that is referred to, among other meanings, in the beginning of the book of Genesis, where the earth is “without form and void.” The Hebrew words here are *tohu v’bohu*, which, translated, means also “confused and bewildered.”

It is clear that we cannot let the idea that conscience is the source of happiness and freedom stand alone by itself, *unprotected*. Left alone, without carrying it to its natural home among the great ideas of the world’s wisdom, it is easy prey for capture and abduction to the land of dreams and illusion. We need to understand that, man being what he is, contact with conscience is as rare and difficult as it is essential to our humanness. Not even the necessary context of great ideas is in itself enough to protect us from dreaming we are obeying the good when in fact we are existentially asleep to the voices that are calling to us from within, the *daimon* of Socrates, the inner *prophetic voice* of the Old and New Testaments and the Koran.



In order to penetrate beneath the surface of the American dream of the pursuit of happiness, we need to look at our origins with new eyes and with a completely open heart, with a spiritual need that is also respectfully aware of the great wisdom traditions that have guided humanity throughout the millennia. With this aim in mind, the aim of simultaneously

deepening and awakening from the American dream, we need to look again at the writings and statements not only of Jefferson, but of all the founders of America—including, of necessity, those who serve as the nation's metaphysical founders, regardless of chronology. We are speaking of not only such figures as Washington, Franklin, Adams, and Madison, but of those whose words and spirit have entered into our blood and marrow from a realm and an *origin* above history: Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, the vast entirety of the American Indian culture, including the greatness of its vision of government (for example, the Iroquois constitution) and the pure *being* of the men and women who were its chiefs and counselors—and this is not to mention countless other men and women—some who are already world-historical names, such as Martin Luther King Jr., and others who have been nearly forgotten, whose lives and actions are waiting in the wings of American history, waiting to be summoned as *personae* and icons in the new, awakening story of America.

4. The Hope of the World

If we look in this way at our origins, from this kind of inner wish for our country, our neighbor, and ourselves, we may begin to see with new eyes why America once was the hope of the world and why it may still be the hope of the world. We may understand anew that all of America's physical and economic strength and its inspired form of government and law still offer the world the broad social conditions that allow men and women freely to search for truth within themselves, which means, first and foremost, to struggle for the awakening of conscience and the power to love. This and this alone constitutes the inner essence of the American dream of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." In a word, and to repeat: *the pursuit of happiness does not mean the pursuit of pleasure. It means the pursuit of a life in which one is in touch with that aspect of oneself which alone can bring happiness.*

When we speak of happiness and conscience in this way, we are speaking of the activation in the human presence of entirely new thoughts, feelings, and sensations, carrying an entirely new quality of energy, and connected to the formation within man of an entirely new self or consciousness within the old self—the "new man" or "new birth" of the Christian contemplative tradition; the purification of "trust in God" (*emunah*) in the interior traditions of Judaism; the inner act of submission to Allah at the heart of the practices of Islam (the very definition of which is "submission"); we are speaking of Buddhist compassion (*karuna*); Hindu

ananda (joy)—the list is long of words and symbols in all the wisdom traditions of the world, pointing to an entirely new state of consciousness that is possible for man, a state characterized by a fusion of objective knowledge, openness to the voice of conscience with the attendant capacity to care for the genuine well-being of one's neighbor and the joy (not "pleasure") of voluntary obedience to a higher reality within and above oneself.

If we honestly consider mankind as it actually is—the state of our world and our own state of being, as it and we actually are—then such an exalted vision of human possibility might well seem desperately remote and itself, if not an illusion, then only an unrealizable goal, however noble. And it is true that throughout history many eloquent expressions of this vision of human possibility have been presented to the world in a fragmentary way, leading people to believe it is a condition of the self that is easily realizable and near to hand. As such, this teaching about man's higher nature has been justly criticized as fantasy—as, for example, Nathaniel Hawthorne bitingly satirized the vision of Emerson and American transcendentalism. It is imperative, therefore, and would be resoundingly "American," if we could discern the practical, experiential evidence for this vision right here and now—in our own lives just as they are and not as we might dream they are or could be.

In fact, the evidence exists right in front of us, in broad daylight, in the form of experiences that are given to almost all of us throughout the course of our lives: the experience of deep wonder, for example, or what we may suffer and directly understand in the confrontation with death, or in the taste of pure joy when we sacrifice what is precious to us for the sake of another. For many of us, we lack only an orientation that would enable us to appreciate the full significance of this evidence. If we but understood all that these experiences tell us about human nature and our own possibilities, it would show not only that every one of us lives most of our life on the surface of ourself, but also that awakening from this dream of life is in fact possible—this life lived on the surface of life, this life of illusion, this life haunted by nightmarish anxieties and hollow daydreams. We would see that not only is awakening possible, but that we have already tasted it—*without knowing it*. We would have before us the experiential basis of metaphysical hope, and the compass point that could direct our search for an inner spiritual struggle within and in the midst of the normal needs, exigencies, and rewards of human life on earth.

In fact, we do have within our own experience the proof that explains why there is no real happiness without real virtue, proof of what America actually offers us and the world insofar as it is a nation that not only

allows, but supports and protects freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of thought, freedom of association, freedom to answer one's authentic physical and social needs, freedom to worship or not worship, freedom, in the metaphysically resonant words of Ghulam Taymuree, to "go anywhere we wish." And, in the end, we must recognize that these political and social freedoms point to the need and possibility to develop within the self the existential capacities that deepen their meaning and transform these freedoms into a concrete force in human life, rather than allowing them to decay into "abducted" concepts that can then be unconsciously manipulated by our egoism, becoming, finally, words that hypnotize us into the manacled dream of "freedom" and the anguished dream of "happiness."

We need to look at these "tastes," these actual experiences we all have had that prove a higher Self exists within us waiting to be allowed into our life. These are glimpses that point us toward the meaning of human life itself and therefore, as a consequence, are essential to the task of deepening our understanding of the vision of America, the idea of America, the hope of America.

We are not necessarily speaking of what are sometimes loosely called "mystical experiences" or of what were once, also loosely, called "peak experiences." We are speaking of the experience of qualities of feeling, sensing, and knowing that could more adequately be termed "impersonal," experiences in which we verify that what the traditions of wisdom tell us is true: I am not my ego—although the ego is part of me; I am not my body—although the body is an essential instrument of the Self; and I am not my thoughts, my logic, my mental associations of information, opinions, and concepts—although all this furniture of the mind is meant to serve (rather than lead) the pursuit of life, liberty, and genuine happiness.

Here are the opening lines of Ralph Waldo Emerson's *The Over-Soul*, the essay rightly regarded as the quintessential expression of his vision of human nature in the universal world:

There is a difference between one and another hour of life, in their authority and subsequent effect. Our faith comes in moments; our vice is habitual. Yet there is a depth in those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences.

We need to appreciate rightly the *moral* dimension of such moments (it is not for nothing that Emerson speaks of such moments in contrast to "our vice"). In genuinely higher moments we move toward understanding, directly through experience, both our habitual lack of conscience and our

potential obedience to conscience. These extraordinary moments are both cognitively and ethically transcendent in that they show us, through experience, that we are in fact beings who can know and see and also *love and will the good*.

If we observe ourselves from this point of view, we will see that all of us have authoritative experiences that can and must be understood as evidence of ourselves as beings in whom knowledge, virtue, and joy are fused—if only a little (a very great “little”) and if only for a moment (a very long, even eternal, “moment”). In the experience of deep wonder, for example, looking up sometimes at the night sky or at a leaf or flower, or a detail of the human body, or in the eyes of a loved one, or at the birth of one’s child: in such, as it were, common/extraordinary moments, we not only *know* in a new way, we *feel* in a new way. In such moments we are given feeling of a quality that never otherwise enters into our life with all its happy moments of pleasure or satisfaction, with all its triumphs and personal gains, its “fun,” its winnings, its prizes, its security and profit, not always even in our satisfaction in providing for our family, and certainly not in the intense “pleasure” of defeating, or imagining the defeat of, our enemy—all, in other words, that constitutes what we may ordinarily call “happiness.”

The genuine feeling of wonder is an *impersonal* feeling; it neither affirms nor threatens the ego. It is full of joy that is not “pleasure.” But, at the same time, this feeling, this experience, this *state of being* is intensely *moral*. Speaking for myself—and I believe this is true for others as well—I have seen that the state of wonder dissolves all impulses of egoism in a natural way, with no forcing whatever. In this state, for the brief moment that it exists, I see that it is impossible for me to be “offended,” to judge another, to hate. In such moments, and in the sense that we are speaking of, I am much closer to being *free*. It is clear that without such experiences and without the work of understanding their significance, our idea of freedom—so central to the values of our society—must inevitably remain truncated and dangerously subject to decay.

But there are other moments which have comparable or even far stronger moral force—also in conjunction with their exceptional cognitive power, offering us knowledge that is inaccessible to us in our state of “habitual vice.” In the moment of grief, for example, we are permeated by the depths of sorrow; we are in anguish, we are bereft, we are lost, we are invaded by pain. *But such grief is not negative*. It is not “personal,” it is not egoistic. In such moments, even more so, perhaps, than what we have just been speaking of, no one can possibly “hurt our feelings,” trouble us, offend us; in such a state it is impossible to hate, it is impossible

to seek personal gain. We can even say—and it has been remarked by many—that a man or woman in grief is capable of an astonishing quality of compassion and love. In the midst of such sorrow, one cannot, of course, speak of “joy” in any recognizable way, but one can whisper to oneself, as it were, of a freedom from all imaginary or neurotic suffering and pleasure, an inner emptiness in which the real Self appears and bows its head in sorrow. We have no words for that fusion of knowing and feeling.

In short, in the moment of grief we are one with reality. It is only with the passage of time—sometimes sooner, sometimes later—that the more personal emotions take the place of this impersonal, objective feeling of sorrow and loss. Yes, then, with the passage of time we may feel sometimes unbearable guilt, fear of the future and of loneliness, or the irruption of greed and cunning, or we may feel rage or despair. Such emotions are not easily sectioned off apart from the impersonal feelings that show us another level of selfhood in ourselves. Often such personal emotions are mixed with and fueled by very fine energies and are, in any case, so fundamental that they must be deeply understood and respected (if not “officially approved”) as an inescapable element of the human condition. But, speaking in generalities, and in brief, we have before us a human spectrum of emotions, at one end of which are the purely impersonal, nonegoistic feelings that are properties of the Self, while at the other end we see the exclusively egoistic reactions that bring to the world and to our individual lives all its conflict, anxious fear, tension in all its destructive forms, agitation of the mind, envy, suggestibility, and sentimentality.

Again, we are trying to offer recognizable examples of experiences characterized by distinct feelings, thought, and sensations that may be taken as evidence of man’s possible inner development. Far more time and space would be needed to “catalog” such experiences and fully to explore what they reveal about the deeper meaning of our values and ideals. These few examples of “inner evidence,” by no means the most remarkable, are cited here only to put a little flesh on the idea that the deepening of the American dream cannot take place without deepening both our theoretical understanding, and also our *experience* of ourselves—in a manner that resonates with the spiritual wisdom that is reflected in the original values and ideals brought forth by those who, *throughout our history, even up to the present day*, may rightly be called the Founders of America and of the American dream. And the kind of deepening of the American dream that I am suggesting relates specifically to how we may justifiably extrapolate and expand upon Jefferson’s vision of the convergence of virtue and happiness. I am suggesting that there are moments in life when we are

given experiences, undeniable experiences, of an entirely new kind and *level* of feeling and knowing (it is always sensed as *new*, no matter how often it may touch us) that shows us, without any doubt whatever, that within ourselves and within each one of us, the Self exists in all its fusion of the capacity to love and the capacity to penetrate into the real world behind the appearances. Acknowledging these moments, reflecting on them, we will come to the conclusion that our first practical need may be ideas and wisdom that can help us in our day-to-day lives to form a truer vision of the structure of the Self, the idea of Man, upon which American democracy and any authentically beneficent social order must be based.

In this context, and again with the aim of illustrating the kind of experience that shows us the contours of the Self behind the “self,” I would like to offer one final and especially appealing example brought to me by an adult student in one of my graduate philosophy classes.

The event in question took place in Mexico City just before Christmas. Juan and his five-year-old son were in the living room decorating the Christmas tree. The doorbell rang and Juan, with his son, went to the door to find a young boy holding his hand out. The boy was about the same age as Juan’s son.

In Mexico, as you may know, the general attitude toward begging and beggars is much more accepting than it is here in the United States. People there are not frightened by beggars. Poverty and need are understood as permanent aspects of life and giving to beggars is done every day without any fanfare or artificial sense of righteousness.

Juan told the little boy to wait and returned to the living room. “Give him one of your toys,” he said to his son. The boy hesitated and then went to his room while his father patiently waited, all attention. Finally, his young son emerged from the bedroom holding one of his old toys, much the worse for wear. “No,” said the father. “Give him your favorite toy.”

The young boy stood stock still. After a moment or two, he shook his head no. His father repeated: “Give him your favorite toy.” Again his son refused and then began to cry. The father gently, but firmly said again: “Give him your favorite toy.”

The little boy very slowly went back to his room and returned holding one of his newest toys. Juan motioned him to go give it to the child waiting at the door. Just as slowly and heavily, the boy walked out of the living room.

A few moments passed. The father had to restrain himself from going to see what was happening at the front door.

Suddenly, Juan’s son came bursting into the room, his face radiant. “Papa,” he said, “can I do that again?”

I certainly do not wish to gild the lily by overanalyzing this event. I would only point out what seems to me obvious: because of the father's insistence, the child was given the experience of what was for him a completely new kind of feeling—a feeling of personal happiness that was at the same directed solely toward the good of another. He did not feel righteous, he did not feel “altruistic,” he did not feel that he would be “repaid” in the long run by God or karma. No, he was simply given the taste of a central aspect of man's essential Self: love.

I am aware that many weightier examples of this inner human capacity could be cited and I do not want to make more of it than it deserves. But neither do I wish to make less of it. Can anyone doubt that this little boy was given a taste of *freedom*? And can anyone deny that the other examples—the experience of genuine wonder, and even, in a deep sense, the moment of grief, as well as the numerous other vertically defined *moments* of our life are also tastes of freedom, not from an outer tyrant, but from an inner tyrant? And who or what is that inner tyrant? What is the struggle and where is the knowledge and what is the nature of the community that can enable a man or woman to work free from that tyranny not for oneself only, but for the sake of one's neighbor? I am saying that the search for this noblest of inner struggles, without which all other ideals of virtue may eventually decay into illusions, requires the protection and support of an outward form of government and social order that is not so common in the tattered and bloody history of the world. I am suggesting that in this direction lies the deep, inner meaning of the hope of America—because it is in this direction that the hope of humanity itself is to be found.

The Guardian at the Door

We are once again with Dr. Carlo Brumat. Our conversation is just now exiting from a long series of indictments of American hypocrisy and arrogance, its foreign policy second to none in self-serving agendas, its economic, military, and cultural imperialism, its coarseness and vulgarity—with sidelong, lingering glances at its technological and scientific creativity, its noble but unrealized ideals, its geographical and world-historical *luck*, its extraordinary capitalistic energy and the simple good will of the politically naïve individual American. We now have nowhere to go but *in*—into philosophy, something we were both waiting for, even if we didn't know it ourselves.

We had come to the question of the nature of virtue itself—which would have seemed a merely academic issue at the beginning of our talk,

but which now somehow seemed terribly concrete and practical. I had said something about the whole world seeming now to be more or less losing the sense of the meaning of life itself, partly because of what is called “modernity,” of which America was the chief agent. The question of virtue arose from this. “Where is the help?” I said. “Where is the guidance for right living? How do we look at that? Can one seriously believe there is real guidance in the world’s religious institutions or in modern science—haven’t they become part of the problem, rather than part of the solution? Where can people turn for ideals and direction?” I was not trying to provoke him; I was trying to sum up the place our conversation had come to.

He surprised me by leaning back in his chair and saying, “Well, after all is said about America’s failings, I do think that America is a great ideal and more than merely a materialistic ideal. It is the ideal of the pursuit of happiness and that is a very powerful idea. The Europeans may have also had this ideal, but in a personal and implicit sense, not as an articulated creed. This is what the American ideal is telling the world and it is saying that you need certain material conditions that are meant not to be ends in themselves, but the means and the wherewithal to pursue one’s happiness.”

He paused, and then said, speaking a bit more softly: “The *philosophical* idea of America is the pursuit of happiness. And if you are asking about the real philosophical meaning of that idea, I would certainly say that—at least for me and for many people—it means being in agreement with what the ancient Greeks called your *daimon*—being attuned to your inner voice. For this, of course, you need a certain level of material well-being.”

He anticipated my next question by immediately adding, and without his usual gesturing: “But, of course, the inner voice is not there all the time.”

“Most of the time . . . ,” I started to say.

“It’s not there most of the time.”

“And so . . .”

“And so . . . ,” he continued, “I think the idea is simply to keep searching, because you are not going to find an answer . . . so you just . . .”

“This is really important, isn’t it? Is there help for this search? Isn’t this what guidance now really could mean? Not moralizing. Not telling us what to do or how to behave or what to think or feel, but helping us understand for ourselves how to search . . .”

“To my mind,” I continued, sensing that I was beginning to find words to characterize something I deeply felt, but had hitherto been unable to articulate, “this is the new meaning of the art of living. Guidance that is

not dogma. Freedom that is not arbitrariness. Principles of living that are not imposed rules. The art of searching . . .”

Brumat interrupted me: “For answers that you are not going to find.”

“Maybe you *are* going to find them.”

He paused. “Maybe,” he said, quietly. “But I haven’t.”

There was a brief silence, as though we were both looking together at some distant object.

“Is there no such thing as help for the search?” I said.

“Well,” he answered, “all the spiritual traditions of the world are out there and maybe they have hit upon the methods—Sufism, for example, which, as you know, I find to be a very agreeable way of thinking.”

How far we were from the idea of America! Or were we perhaps only now coming very near to it?

After another pause, I said: “It seems essential to have people with you, companions in the search.”

“Yes,” he said, “you have to have somebody, not necessarily living now. You can find solace or stimulation, encouragement, by reading past authors.”

“But it’s not just reading, it’s practicing.”

“Reading, meditating, practicing, yes . . . and then discussing with other people.”

“I think so,” I said. “That’s part of the search. Now, here is the essential question: are there conditions of social order that allow or even support that search, and others that obstruct it—conditions of tyranny or oppression . . .”

“Like Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia, yes. You need a truly egalitarian society, a condition that allows dialogue.”

“Dialogue,” I said. “You mean . . . freedom of speech?”

“Freedom of speech . . . and egalitarianism.”

“You mean . . . freedom of inquiry? Freedom of thought? Freedom of access to knowledge, not just to become ‘smart’ and develop new material technologies. Not just to make the trains run on time, but to allow the search for inner truth.”

Dr. Brumat was nodding yes.

“But *that* is America!”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s near to the original meaning of America. Social order in its metaphysical meaning. It’s the deeper meaning of civilization itself.”

He was no longer nodding yes. But he was not nodding no either.

“What I’m trying to say is that the American dream, whatever it may have become or will become, is only going to be justified in the long run if

it provides conditions that protect this search, that allow men and women to search for their own truth. That's what America is all about, in my opinion, not cars and military power—those things may be necessary as a shield. America as a military and economic power may be necessary as what you could call 'the guardian at the door.' But behind the door, inside the room, something has to be made possible that far transcends the material and physical shield. It's absurd to love the car and the guns and ships, necessary though they may be in the jungle of the world. It's what can go on inside the room that justifies the guardians at the door in the life of nations."

I continued speaking, not really wanting to stop. "At this moment in history, America is the guardian at the door of the spiritual search. Tomorrow, maybe it will be another country, who knows which? Today America is the most powerful country in the world, but it's only going to be allowed to exist if it protects something really precious to mankind and to the earth—which is the search for truth, real truth, not so-called 'truth.' That's what I think."

I waited for Dr. Brumat's response. I was touched when it came:

"I fear, honestly, that most of the leadership of America does not care at all about what you're speaking about."

"Perhaps not, certainly not. But it may not matter, just as it doesn't matter that new immigrants want swimming pools—they still contribute to conditions that make America itself. It's the same with our leaders. Whatever they may believe, they support these same conditions when they support America the powerhouse. The job of our leaders, as leaders of the government, is not to search within, whatever their private life may be. Their job is to protect. Government minds the cup; society fills the cup. What matters is that the cup, and the space inside it, remains.

"All I'm trying to ask is whether there is a way of telling the story of America that reinstates, in new language, its original vision of what it means to search together for our real, essential humanness and what it means for a government to protect that possibility."

"And this search," said Dr. Brumat, "is unlikely ever to come to an end. And, as you also know, it is better to search for the truth than to claim you have found it. This search is something that can keep you going forever, as the main purpose of your life. And, as for happiness, and as for virtue, whatever little progress you feel you have made is enough to fill you with joy . . ."

"Joy and hope . . .," I said.

"Especially," he said, ". . . especially if you can share it."

". . . and share it . . .," I repeated the words.

“You see,” he then said, “this is fruition without consumption.”

We both smiled. “Whereas,” he continued, “a great deal of America is about consumption without fruition.”

And that was the end of our conversation, apart from my saying, as we got up to leave, “That is beautiful, but this is also the daily bread of Christianity, the truth that you can really share, you can break bread, the loaves and the fishes can be given out—because it’s not literally bread they’re speaking about, it’s truth, it’s virtue, it’s . . .”

“Love.”

“It’s love.”

The Author

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His most recent book, *The American Soul: Rediscovering the Wisdom of the Founders*, was published by Tarcher/Putnam in February of 2002.

Fetzer Institute

Fetzer Institute is a private operating foundation that supports research, education, and service programs exploring the integral relationships among body, mind, and spirit. In the wake of September 11, 2001, we at Fetzer Institute have found ourselves, like many others, reexamining our purpose and mission with the hope that our efforts can be of greater relevance to the world. This inquiry has led to the communal development of a new mission: to foster awareness of the power of love and forgiveness in the emerging global community.

Inspired by the vision of John E. Fetzer, the Institute's guiding purpose is to awaken into and serve Spirit for the transformation of self and society, based on the principles of wholeness of reality, freedom of spirit, and unconditional love. The Institute believes that the critical issues in the world can best be served by integrating the inner life of mind and spirit with the outer life of action and service in the world. This is the "common work" of the Fetzer Institute community and the emerging global culture. Please visit our website at www.fetzer.org.

Two Dreams of America



*“Then, what of the American dream? Is it a vision or an illusion?
Do we need to deepen this dream or awaken from it?”*

Can anyone doubt the importance of this question? In one form or another, it is a question that has been gathering strength for decades, and it now stands squarely in the path not only of every American, but, such is the planetary influence of America, of every man and woman in the world. What really is America? What does America mean?

To think well and truly about this question, we need to relate it to the deepest inner questions that mankind can ask.”

—JACOB NEEDLEMAN from *Two Dreams of America*

The Fetzer Institute’s project on Deepening the American Dream began in 1999 to explore the relationship between the inner life of spirit and the outer life of service. Through commissioned essays and in dialogue with such writers as Huston Smith, Jacob Needleman, Gerald May, Cynthia Bourgeault, Kathleen Norris, Robert Inchausti, Carolyn Brown, Elaine Pagels, Parker Palmer, and others, the project is beginning to sow the seeds of a national conversation. With the publication of this inaugural essay, the thinking and writing coming from these gatherings is being offered in a series of publications sponsored by the Fetzer Institute in partnership with Jossey-Bass. The essays and individual volumes and anthologies to be published will explore and describe the many ways, as individuals and communities and nations, that we can illuminate and inhabit the essential qualities of the global citizen who seeks to live with the authenticity and grace demanded by our times.