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TIME and the SOUL



Where Has All the Meaningful Time Gone—and Can We Get it Back?

FOREWORD BY JOHN CLEESE

An Excerpt From

Time and The Soul: Where Has All the Meaningful Time Gone – And Can We Get It Back?

by Jacob Needleman

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FOREWORD

If you have picked up this book, gentle reader, because you feel starved of time, permanently harried, pressurized by obligations, comprehensively devoid of serenity, and so on—then be warned: this is not a self-help book. Instead, Jerry Needleman has written a *Self*-help book.

To clarify, self-help books consist of:

- a. Forty-odd pages telling you how widespread your problem is, complete with reassuring anecdotes with names carefully disguised.
- b. Seventy-odd pages telling you the life-changing benefits that will accrue to anyone reading said book.
- c. Sixty pages telling you how the author modestly stumbled upon this ground-breaking IDEA.
- d. Somewhere around page 178, the IDEA itself.
- e. Eighty pages of predictable working-through of said IDEA.

f. Twenty-odd pages telling you how you can give more money to the author through various courses, spin-offs, self-help groups based on the IDEA, and so on.

However, this Self-help book explains why the selfhelp approach to our time problem is akin to rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*. He shows that only a change in the scale of our thinking can really help us, and that change involves accessing our real Self.

He recounts an extraordinary experience he had in his teens that he says "was a taste, a forerunning, of the Self." And he explores this idea for the rest of the book.

The astonishing thing about his writing is that it somehow conveys the change of scale involved in a way that touches you at your core. For example, Jerry suggests some feeling experiments that I've never done before, and which caused me, for several hours, to experience my own life slightly differently.

So, frankly, this book is a bit alarming. Worse, Jerry stresses that what he has written is merely a first step in creating the conditions under which we might encounter our Self more often. He encourages those interested to pursue their Self through the great sacred traditions.

So, dear reader, unless you're truly interested in change, a self-help book might be much less disturbing.

John Cleese

PROLOGUE

This book is addressed to everyone who is starved for time. That is, it is addressed to everyone. We are all living in a culture that traps us into doing too many things, taking on too many responsibilities, facing too many choices and saying yes to too many opportunities. Nearing the end of over a century of inventions designed to save time, we find ourselves bereft of time itself. As Jeremy Rifkin has pointed out, "we have surrounded ourselves with time-saving technological gadgetry, only to be overwhelmed by plans that cannot be carried out, appointments that cannot be honored, schedules that cannot be fulfilled, and deadlines that cannot be met."¹ It is the new poverty, the poverty of our affluence. It is our famine, the famine of a culture that has chosen things over time, the external world over the inner world.

It has become the aching question of our era. What used to be considered a sign of success—being busy, having many responsibilities, being involved in many projects or activities—is not being felt as an affliction. It is leading us nowhere. More and more it is being experienced as meaningless.

This is the real significance of our problem with time. It is a crisis of meaning. What has disappeared is meaningful time. It is not technology or the accelerating influence of money; it is not global capitalism that is responsible for the time famine. The root of our modern problem with time is neither technological, sociological, economic nor psychological. It is metaphysical. It is a question of the meaning of human life itself. The aim of this book is to uncover the link between our pathology of time and the eternal mystery of what a human being is meant to be in the universal scheme of things. The wisdom teachings of the world, each in its own way, have spoken of what we may call the soul, the spirit, the timeless, the eternal in man. But the challenge is to approach these ancient ideas in a way that is practical, that can actually lead us toward a solution of our problem. Words alone, no matter how sacred; ideas alone, no matter how profound, are not enough to help us confront our problem with time. But words, properly received; ideas, thoughtfully pondered; stories and images heard and attended to with an open heart, can help us feel the relationship between the question of our being and the problem of our life in time, after which ideas can find their proper place in our minds. In any case, this is how I have written this book. A story and an image can enter our psyche in a way that concepts and analyses cannot. And so this examination of time and the human soul should perhaps begin, as all true stories begin, with the suddenly pregnant phrase:

"Once upon a time . . ."

PART I

ONCE UPON A TIME

CHAPTER 1

THE MAN WITH THE SOFT BROWN EYES

here is a novel I want to write. The hero is a man of fifty, which was my age when I began dreaming of this story. His life is in crisis, as was my own then, and through magic he is sent back in time to meet himself at the age of sixteen. The hero's name is Eliot: Eliot Appleman. My name is Jacob: Jacob Needleman.

I speak of this as a fiction, but in my heart I don't think of it that way. Doesn't the sixteen-year-old Jacob (or Jerry, as I am called) still exist? And isn't it possible to go back and be with him? Time? Surely, time is not what we think it is. We are wrong about so many lesser things; how could we imagine we understand the greatest of all mysteries, time? The hero of my story, Eliot Appleman, is a psychiatrist. As for myself, I am a professor of philosophy. Both Eliot and I presume to an ability to see beneath the surface of human affairs. He has been trained to look into the psyche for hidden patterns and I, the philosopher, regard the whole world as a tissue of appearances, behind which there operate great laws that can be discerned only through what the ancient teachers called wisdom.

In the course of this story the older Eliot learns that he cannot navigate his life without opening his mind and heart to a reality that the scientifically trained "Dr. Appleman" might have regarded as a mystical fantasy. Here, too, my own life corresponds, but in a reverse way: in that critical period of my life I was to learn that one cannot go far with great metaphysical questions, such as the question of time, without the hard work of confronting one's own inner emptiness.

PHILADELPHIA: 1952

I dream most often of the novel's opening scenes in which the two Eliots first meet each other. The teenage Eliot is at a restaurant in downtown Philadelphia with a young woman who is a year older. Her name is Elaine. He is falling in love for the first time in his life.

It is Saturday afternoon, the last weekend of the summer. The Turin Grotto is busy; black-jacketed waiters are everywhere on the run. The older Eliot quietly arranges to be seated at a table next to the two young people. They are absorbed in each other and do not notice him. Breathlessly, he eavesdrops on their conversation and watches them out of the corner of his eye.

The teacher who sent Eliot back in time gave him no special instructions about the laws of time travel. And Eliot was so stunned by what was being offered him that he did not even ask questions.

He has been sent back to study himself at what seemed to him to be a decisive and defining moment in his life. Nothing is said to him about whether he is allowed to intervene in the past and influence the future. Eliot soon discovers why such a warning has not been given: it is simply not necessary. The events of our lives are so tightly interconnected, and our lives as a whole proceed within such a vast network of purposes which we do not see, that no ordinary man or woman is able to know the real turning points of his or her life, the real crossroads where meaningful change can take place. Without that kind of knowledge, we can press and poke at our lives where we will, but it will have no more effect than a temporary disturbance that soon closes over again, as tissue closes over a minor wound. The kind of changes we seek to make in our lives are usually no more than superficial wounds in the body of time.

What Eliot is overhearing at the table next to him is a tumultuous conversation during which the young woman begins to cry. As yet, the older Eliot is so overwhelmed by the mere fact of his being there that he cannot even trust himself to look at the young Eliot. I mean to make a great deal of the moment when the two Eliots first look into each other's eyes. The younger Eliot will instinctively turn away without knowing why—as though he had just touched fire. The older Eliot will feel a tender sadness and the hint of a kind of love for which he has no name. I want to treat that moment as an example of what happens inside all of us when we even fleetingly breach our ordinary sense of time. What we loosely call memory is, in fact, the surface of a capacity that, in its depths, offers the only hope for mankind and for us as individuals. But we are content and conditioned to stay on the surface of memory; and there, on the surface of memory, we remain prisoners of time.

The older Eliot struggles to find an attitude of objectivity as he hears the young woman's tearful accusations. He knows very well the effect they will have on the young Eliot and what that portends about his whole future. But it is not the kind of knowing that makes a difference.

The older Eliot believed that he remembered this particular scene. But he sees now that he did not remember it at all. So that is what she really said! So that is how she really acted! No wonder I was so helpless!

Suddenly, she puts a cigarette between her lips. The young Eliot fumbles, looking everywhere for a match. Without thinking twice, the older man reaches over with his lighter. The woman looks at him with dark eyes as she lights her cigarette. A powerful current flows between them. His hand grazes hers as he takes the lighter away.

TIME AND PASSION

The older man's heart pounds and he hastily turns back to his table as an anguished passion begins to rise in him. Emotions that are part of our essence do not change. They are covered over, but great feeling is not in time. It is always now; it does not know about the future or the past.

Very well, then, with what do we perceive the passage of time? Is time only a construction of thought—thought disconnected from feeling? Yet nothing seems more real and unchangeable than time and its passing. Nothing seems more constricting than the limitations of time. And nothing more powerful than our impulse to live, to live longer, to live forever and not disappear in the unholy infinity of unending time. Do we have so little time in our lives because we allow ourselves so little real passion?

The young woman runs out of the restaurant and the young Eliot remains at the table, sunk in confusion and despair. The older man hesitatingly starts to go over to him, but the young Eliot suddenly throws money on the table and runs out after the woman. The older man remains at his table and tries calmly to drink his cold water and to remember the aim for which he came back in time: to study, to understand.

TO EVERY THING THERE IS A SEASON

It has long ago been said that time does not exist in itself. What we call time is an abstraction, something for philosophers to analyze and for scientists to make use of in their equations. Time in itself cannot be seen or sensed. Yet it enters into everything, as was said by Solomon the Preacher. Everything, everything has its own kind of time. And we will never solve the problem of time without understanding this ancient truth. We will never "manage" time, we will never understand our past, we will never be able to prepare our future without grasping the unique coloration of time in every real, human event, or every real, cosmic event-which means events that have breadth, length, love and hate, light and fury, energy, meaning, struggle and the silence of universal law. This universe, this galaxy, this earth, this body we call our own, all live and breathe and feel and have mind-and therefore they are infused by time. It is not only we who love and hate, who sow and reap. It is true of everything each in its way. What the Preacher has said of human life is actually being said of all that exists under the hand of God-that is, "under the sun."

- To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven; A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to
 - mourn, and a time to dance \dots^2

THE LIE OF MEMORY

The scene shifts to later in the day. The older Eliot is driving in a car. He knows—he remembers—where to find the younger Eliot.

The young Eliot is on his way home, slowly walking along a parkway in the oppressive afternoon heat, not really caring what happens. The older Eliot slows the car as he approaches his younger self dejectedly walking along the edge of the parkway. For a brief moment he thinks of what he has left in order to come back in time. Back there, everywhere he turned he was crashing against the lies that made up his life. The facade of a "shared understanding" with his wife could no longer conceal the lack of any real connection between them. The young heart within him long ago was left to live on fantasy and resignation. As for his children, his natural love for them was again and again thwarted by ideas of what a father was supposed to be and by preconceived ideas of how his children were supposed to be toward him: lies in the form of guilt alternating with resentment. His profession? How long had it been since the trained psychiatrist had actually heard or seen a patient? Lies in the form of techniques that masqueraded as attention. What had become of the yearning for truth that had first drawn him to his work, where was the love of reality that saw the laws of God in the laws of the mind? Was that young physician still alive-somewhere in him, somewhere in time?

With sudden, startling clarity he sees the self-pitying slope of young Eliot's shoulders, a vision that goes straight into the older man's heart and soul and makes him aware of the essence of this characteristic emotion of his. This one glimpse shows the trained psychiatrist that neither his nor his patients' memories are as real or as deep as they need to be. My God, he thinks as he slows the car beside the boy, I have never *really* remembered; no one has. What a fraud: all this remembering is only the work of a small part of the mind, mixing its accidental thoughts and feelings with scattered, random fragments of the past. We have never deeply remembered! We have never really gone back in time. We have never seen the roots of our being with the whole of our mind.

FATE AND THE REAL FUTURE

Walking along the edge of the parkway, the young man is now aware of the dark green car slowing down alongside him. The passenger door opens.

"Need a lift?" the driver says.

Eliot had never before hitchhiked or accepted a ride from a stranger. But now, without the slightest hesitation, he jumps into the car and shuts the door. For a moment he wonders at that. Perhaps, he thinks, he was so preoccupied with his worries that he had no room in his mind to be afraid or even normally cautious. Or perhaps it was something else. The car speeds off. "Where are you going?" the stranger asks.

How will this scene now proceed? How to understand what happens in us when we first make contact with our fate? Fate: the word has lost its meaning for us, it has become a cliché; at best a superstition. But suppose there really exists such a thing as fate? Suppose, underneath the windswept ripples of our everyday battles with time, our anxious, everyday efforts to steer our lives, there exists a deeper current carrying something essential in us to a predetermined future? And what would that something be within ourselves that lives, or tries to live, wants to live, beneath the surface of time as we know it; that wants to break into the daylight of our consciousness-there to grow with us, perhaps? What happens in an individual when we first feel that something deeper within ourselves is calling to us, trying to see us, not only from the past but from the future—a future we cannot even imagine in the midst of our crowded, complicated minutes, hours and days, but which is in fact what we are really starving for when we are starved for time?

To the question, "Where are you going?" the young Eliot is tempted to answer, "Anywhere, I don't care." But instead he says, simply:

"Home."

Eliot is only vaguely aware that stranger seems to know which route to take. He is drowning in his emotions about Elaine. Why was she trying to push him away, and why did her pushing him away have the effect of making him even more attached to her? More willing to make insane promises to her that would destroy his life?

The car is humming along the leafy East River Parkway, heading toward North Philadelphia. The open windows let in the hot, humid wind carrying the fragrances of late August.

The voice of the stranger breaks into young Eliot's thoughts:

"I guess pretty soon school will be starting for you."

Eliot turns his head to look at him: stocky, medium height with broad shoulders; small, sinewy hands gripping the wheel. His longish hair and wispy beard are faded brown heavily streaked with gray. Young Eliot rightly guesses him to be about fifty.

Eliot feels a sensation of warmth and relaxation and starts to respond to the small-talk question about school. But thoughts of Elaine are commanding his attention. Of course, he cannot know that his actual future is sitting there next to him, plainly visible, and that the relaxation he feels is, in part, due to his subliminal intuition that nothing of what he fears is going to happen. He cannot consciously know that his fear and anguish about the future are based completely on imagination—or, rather, one part truth to a hundred parts imagination. He cannot know this, but still he is bemused to see how easily he is set free for a moment from his anguish. Nevertheless, he turns his attention back to Elaine—in a sense, he *allows* his attention to be swallowed up again by fear and imagination.

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My intention here is to let the story begin to explore our general pathology of time-in this case our crippled relationship to the future. Under the surface of our continual worrying, our tense efforts to foresee and manipulate the future in our thoughts and in the countless unnecessary actions that are, simply, what we may rightly call a *waste of time*—under the surface of all this agitation, which comprises so much of our waking life, there is a knowing which can be very deeply hidden, but which sometimes surfaces for a moment-as in the ancient symbol of a great, wise fish brooding deep beneath the surface of the waters. In certain symbologies this profound inner knowing is represented by the salmon-which takes its name from Solomon the Wise. Not only is this the wisest of the creatures of the deep, but its action is directed toward one thing-to struggle with incomprehensible perseverance against the onrushing current. There is a wisdom in us that knows and intends in a manner that we are blind to while in the course of our lives we are driven helplessly away from our source by the currents of automatic time. There is that in us which could give us an entirely different kind of future than the one we are trying to fabricate in our anxious imaginings, and an entirely different kind of future than what actually awaits us at the end of our individual allotment of automatically flowing time. But, as we are, we do not and cannot see the future for what it is. All our agitation, all our planning and preparing, all our manipulations never lead us toward the future as it actually takes form. We can barely even imagine what it will be like to cross to the other side of the room, far less imagine what our life will actually be like in five years or one or six months or even in a week or a day. It is one of the fundamental illusions of humankind that we can imagine the future in any true sense. We may pick certain aspects of the future and predict them, but the main thrust of the future, with all its levels of interconnecting events and detail, is never seen at all. This lack is due to our state of being; it has nothing whatever to do with the nature of time itself.

THE FIRST LOOK

Eliot keeps casting sidelong glances at the stranger, who has kept his eyes forward and has allowed the silence to exist without attempting further conversation. But when the car leaves the parkway and is stopped at a traffic light, the stranger suddenly turns to face Eliot.

"Where do you want to go?"

Eliot now finds himself looking at the stranger full face. He opens his mouth to answer him, but no words can come out. Instead, he sharply turns his head away. Suddenly his breathing is coming hard. Why? There is nothing at all sinister in the man's face, quite the contrary. The soft brown eyes, flecked with green and yellow, are warm and radiant. The well-formed features could be those of a child except that they are packed together with such intensity. The smile is full of light, although the forehead is deeply creased by the tracks of concerns that never let go. Eliot cautiously turns his head to look once more at the stranger, who is now concentrating again on the road. He stares at the profile, transfixed. His breathing is still labored and his heart is pounding. On the stranger's temple, partially concealed by unruly tufts of gray-brown hair, Eliot discerns the horizontal indentation of a wingshaped scar. With trembling fingers, he reaches up to the right side of his own face, afraid of what he will find, yet knowing full well that the same scar, with precisely the same strange winglike form marks his own skin!

He violently jerks his hand away from his own scar and swivels his head forward, staring through the windshield at the oncoming cars. He is shivering and his breathing now comes in throaty staccato bursts.

"Don't be frightened," says the stranger, easing the car through heavy traffic of the afternoon rush hour. His soothing words have little effect. For a fleeting moment Eliot has the impulse to open the door and leap out. But of course he doesn't. In the first place, he would probably get killed, and in the second place, he is so frozen with fear that he can't move a muscle anywhere in his body. And in the third place, he reasons, this is probably a dream anyway. He is probably at home on the livingroom couch dozing, as he sometimes does, with his head bent sideways at a crazy angle.

But he knows very well that he is not dreaming.

"Don't be frightened," the stranger repeats. And, in fact, alongside the sense of terror, Eliot again detects the stirring of something warm and pleasant, this time in his chest. But when he moves his eyes and looks again at the stranger, he is once more engulfed by fear.

We often say we wish to see into the future. But to see into the future would mean to see into ourselves, to see what our choices really have been and to see the consequences of all our actions. But it would also mean-and here terror enters-seeing how little we have understood what life is really for; it would mean seeing what we have thrown away. It is only children or fools-so wisdom teaches-who imagine that the passage of time obeys the trivial laws and patterns that we live by from minute to minute and hour to hour as we nervously consult our watches and our calendars. Only fools-fools like usthink we can "manage" the great river of time. Time flows through us and is spent in our thoughts and feelings and sensations-not only in the external activities of our lives, our dealings, our triumphs and defeats. Only fools imagine they can manage time without mastering the constant inner flow of thought, emotion and sensation. When Reality comes toward us-not the little facts we earnestly call by that name, but the timeless objective truth about what man is and is meant to be-we automatically run from it and what it shows us of our ego's insignificance. Yet also underneath the surface of our socially constructed persona, our ego, there is that same calm knowing, like a warmth, an intimation of joy. Young Eliot feels terror, the terror of being visited by a force infinitely beyond his comprehension; the terror of being seen by his own eyes! How can the greatness of Reality, a greatness

that encompasses all the worlds above and below—how can that infinite greatness have my own face, my own eyes? The ancient Hindu teaching that ultimate reality is the consciousness of *I*—is that actually more than just an interesting, or perhaps inspiring, metaphysical concept? Is it really concretely true, true of *me*?

Why are we afraid of being seen-by ourselves?

There exists an entirely different kind of fear than the fear our upbringing and psychological world have injected into us: a fear of objective truth. The "person" Eliot Appleman, the young man seated next to the driver and the one hidden inside the driver himself, that "person" has been fabricated by the world in order to ward off truth! That "person" in ourselves is formed to protect us from the contradictory messages coming to us from the so-called "real" world. Why has this deformation occurred? Because, so wisdom teaches, society long ago ceased to send us messages of objective truth that call us to struggle for individual being. The "world" does not know about the cosmos and its laws full of purpose and conscious order. The message of the cosmos to man-as we hear from the ancient teachings-is: although you are mortal, although your time is finite, you have within you that which can transcend time. Freedom from time-the approximate term for which is "immortality"-awaits you; you are made for that, but you must search and search to receive in your life the winds of this immortality, this endless presence, that are constantly being sent to man from the center of the universe.

TIME AND FEAR

Our world, our culture, is not the cosmos and it sends a different kind of message to us: your time is finite and you are finite. Whether the message has God in it or speaks against God does not matter; behind it is the same terrifying vision that compels the personality of a man or woman to develop around a lie. The world is lying to us about the cosmos; the world is lying to us about reality. At the very beginning of our lives it tells us the universe is going to hurt us, destroy us. It tells us these things not necessarily through concepts and ideas, but through the anxious behavior and the deep-down faithlessness of our elders. God or no God, it rarely makes a difference. The personality is formed to protect us from metaphysical pain. And it does this very well. Too well. Woe to him who cannot tell the difference between the fear of objective truth—a truth which exposes us to our lies in order to show us the fundamental love at the heart of realityand the fear of the false universe which our world injects into us.

In the false world, time is our enemy, but we do not really know how powerful it is; we don't really *feel* the deep, rolling, cruel power of the river of time, so busy are we managing the crisscrossing waves on the surface. But in the real world there is a wind that comes from "the center of the universe," from the "beginning"—in the language of myth. "Long ago," "once upon a time," a message and a messenger were sent to humankind. This messenger is always being sent. I want this scene in the novel to evoke the feeling of the first actual contact that a man or woman can have with this other message and this other fear, this good fear that threatens everything in us which has conformed itself to the lie. This good fear is sometimes known to us as the experience of the *uncanny*. Experiences that break through our ordinary sense of time often have this element of the uncanny about them.

WHO ARE YOU?

For the first time in my life, I *am seen*. And what is it that sees me? I am seen by something in myself that is outside of time, something that is always there, calling to me. What is it? Who ...?

Eliot closes his eyes and tries again and again to fight down the terror that is causing him to tremble all over his body. Through clenched teeth he slowly, agonizingly, pushes out the words, "Who are you?"

The stranger waits a moment, then answers, softly, calmly:

"Who do you think I am?"

The young Eliot keeps his eyes closed and says nothing. He senses the car turning, slowing to a stop, backing up, parking. He does not want to say who he thinks the stranger is. He doesn't even want to think it.

With his eyes still closed, he says only:

"What do you want with me?" His heart is now pounding so strongly it seems it will burst.

this material has been excerpted from

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