

Howard Zinn

A photograph showing a massive crowd of people gathered on a wide street in Washington, D.C., with the U.S. Capitol building in the background. The crowd is dense and diverse, with many people wearing blue and white clothing. The Capitol building's dome is prominent in the upper right. The image is framed by a thick red border.

*The
Common Cradle
of Concern*

Essays on Deepening the American Dream
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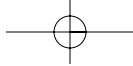
INTERVIEWER'S PREFACE

HOWARD ZINN IS A RARE HISTORIAN. He has repeatedly pulled open events, past and present, with such honesty and integrity that we have been forced to reassess who we are and where we have come from, all in the service of where we are going. To do this, he has stretched the boundaries of traditional research and reporting. His now classic *People's History of the United States* changed how we understand ourselves as a nation. It has challenged America to acknowledge its self-centeredness. It has called the question, How many sides must we seek and listen to in order to approximate the truth? His empathy for the people he writes about never clouds his clarity but only expands our understanding of the complex net of relationships that make up history.

The author of more than twenty books, Howard Zinn is still an actively engaged citizen of the world whose commitment to unearthing and describing the truth of our society and democracy over the course of fifty years has made his one of those steadfast voices by which we know with certainty where the winds are coming from and what they have done. He has stood tall in the midst of storms of all sizes like a pennant strapped to the top of a mast. Is it any wonder that his writings are bare and essential, having endured the full brunt of the elements?

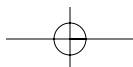
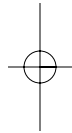
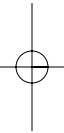
In the winter of 2004, Howard was kind enough to explore some questions I had sent along about the nature of being an American today. I invited him to engage in conversation about the issues of today through his vast lens of history. We spoke for several hours on two occasions (December 13, 2004, and January 31, 2005). What you have before you are the siftings of those conversations put together and edited by both of us into a meditation on America, moral progress, and the myths of freedom called *The Common Cradle of Concern*.

I am deeply grateful to Howard for his openness to explore such deep conversation together and for his goodwill in letting us share all this more



widely. Reading anything by Howard Zinn feels cleansing in its truth-telling and like an affirmation from a voice that lives deep within us all. I hope you will agree.

—MARK NEPO



THE COMMON CRADLE OF CONCERN

Howard Zinn
Interviewed by Mark Nepo

Being a Historian

MARK NEPO: Let's start with a central question: What motivated you to become a historian?

HOWARD ZINN: Why I became a historian, simply, was to make some connection between the past and the present. To me, the most important question that can be asked of a historian is, Why are you doing history? I did not go into the field of history in order to become a professional historian. It was not my intent to become successful in the field and to write for the historical journals and to go to annual meetings of the American Historical Association, exciting as they are! That was not my intent. It comes out of my own background that I had not gone into the academic world straight through from high school to college to graduate school to teaching. I had all these years in between high school and college in which I did other things, in which my ideas were formed, and in which I became very much concerned about what was going on in the world. And so becoming a historian for me meant simply trying to see what could be gleaned from the past that would be useful in the present. I wasn't going to be one of those historians who sort of went into the stacks and never came out. I wanted to go into the past and see what I could find and see if it could throw any light on the issues of war and peace and inequality and racism and just how people should live their lives. That desire informed my teaching from the beginning and really guided me in my writing. The result was that I didn't write articles for scholarly magazines; I wrote for the general public. When I wrote books, I didn't write books that were intended for my colleagues and for specialists in history.

NEPO: Not only does this seem to be such a useful way to engage the past as a society, but if we can assume that social transformation comes out of personal transformation, then it strikes me that this is also a wonderful model for an individual or a family or a profession. How do we have an honest and clean relationship with the past? Do you want to drift into that for a little bit?

ZINN: Drift is the right word. I will drift cautiously. It's interesting to connect historians that study societies and nations with psychologists and other people who are involved in personal histories. I wonder why the two don't learn more from one another. And learning from the past about societies and political entities would seem to me to apply also to persons—it says to me that we all as people should be learning from our own past and from the past of other people whom we observe and with whom we have had relationships. There's a very rich body of information there in our own lives and in the lives of other people that we very often neglect. Therefore, out of such neglect, we act as if the phenomena that we encounter in a particular day are totally new. And if we do that, then we are limiting our capacity to deal with whatever happens to us. So I do see history as being as important as a study of our own personal history.

NEPO: Your work offers us such an honest and clean relationship with our own past. How have you gone about this? What are the ways of seeing and feeling that have enabled that kind of relationship? Are there things we can glean from the process you've found yourself in as a historian?

ZINN: Maybe one important thing is to try to escape traditional ways of thinking. Try to avoid the repetition of what have been accepted truths because very often we start from a set of ideas that we don't question and then go on from there. And I think the important thing is to examine the most fundamental premises in a situation. The cleanest approach is to get as far back as you can to a state where you can think freshly about a situation. That means trying to block out the things that you've been told and the things that you've studied that may get in the way of a fresh approach. Connected with that, I suppose, is the risk to have more confidence in people who are not experts or who are not authorities and to be willing to plumb both the experiences and the ideas of ordinary people whose ideas and experiences would otherwise be lost.

The Myths of Freedom

NEPO: I am reminded of the maxim that if we don't learn from the past, history will repeat itself. In considering this parallel from the collective to the individual, I was recently at a meeting on the use of story as a transformational practice. A very interesting notion was put forth by Allan Chinen, a psychiatrist and mythologist who uses myths and story in his clinical practice. As he spoke, I was thinking about our upcoming talk. He suggested that through our wounding and our pain and our fear, we all get stuck, at some point in our lives, in some kind of "minimyth" of our own, which we repeat—at least until we can enter the greater story that surrounds us and break out of it somehow. So I was wondering, are there any stories that you think America is stuck in, because of pain or wound or fear, that we keep repeating?

ZINN: I think the myth that we're most stuck in is probably the myth that we came to this continent simply as refugees and not as predators—that we came here in innocence and were beset by savages. The image we have of ourselves is the image of the pilgrim—these good people, simple people, God-fearing people who crossed the ocean under great difficulties and carved out a new life in the wilderness under attack from Indians and so on. It's a myth of innocence. And I'm not trying to deny the personal innocence of people. I think this is very important. There's a personal innocence in people who are caught up in something larger than themselves. Yet that larger thing may not always be innocent.

Often individual soldiers are innocent, though they're caught up in an enterprise that is far from innocent and into which they are propelled. It suggests the importance of examining who we are and where we are at any moment and wondering if we have been trapped into some artificial entity—what Kurt Vonnegut called a "granfalloon"¹—which is then carrying on activities that we personally should really not be happy with. The myth of innocence is not a myth when it comes to the individuals who mean well but who find themselves then in a situation in which they become less than human. So sure, Americans came here in innocence. But then, because of the situation, they found themselves driving other people off their land. They found themselves in desperation hurting other people and developing a power over other people. And that myth of innocence then accompanies the story of Columbus and the story of the Pilgrims; that myth of innocence has persisted throughout American history down to the present day. Even the most crass and obvious acts of cruelty

that the government engages in are suffused with this misleading form of innocence. In this way, obvious immoral acts—like going halfway around the world to wage war against a much smaller, weaker country and killing a lot of people—seem patriotic and even ennobling: we are doing this to help other people; we are doing this to bring freedom and democracy to the people of Iraq. So that myth of innocence has pervaded all of American history and is still with us today.

Along with this is the myth of American exceptionalism. By that I mean the myth that somehow the United States is unique in the world in its goodness, in its generosity, in its liberty. Of course, the United States *is* unique in many ways. But the uniqueness attributed to the United States in what I would call the myth of American exceptionalism should not give us the feeling of superiority. Yet ironically, the myth of innocence immediately turns into a myth of superiority because it is hard for us to believe that other people are innocent. We assume that other people in the world are not as innocent as we are. So the idea of innocence becomes also an idea of exceptionalism and superiority that is then dangerous—not just for other people but for our own personhood because it corrupts us and poisons us as individuals and destroys the true innocence that we deserve. It's interesting to me that social scientists talk about the “myth of the noble savage” and point out that the primitive people who are sometimes romanticized as peaceful and unselfish were often, to the contrary, violent and acquisitive. In fact, there was a good deal of truth to that myth, at least in certain Indian cultures in North America. And it was the white European invader who, in expelling the Indians from their land, engaged in an enormous act of violence and expropriation. Despite this fact, a myth grew that we might call the “myth of the noble civilizer”—that the United States, expanding as it did across the continent and then into the Caribbean and across the Pacific, was doing all this for noble reasons. In other words, we were an exceptional imperialist in that unlike the other imperial powers in European history—the French, the Dutch, the Spanish, the English—our motives were pure. As President William McKinley is reported to have said when explaining his decision to send an army to take over the Philippines, it was to “civilize and Christianize” the Filipinos. In the course of that noble effort, as Mark Twain and others pointed out, we killed several hundred thousand Filipinos. That myth of American exceptionalism—of the “noble civilizer”—continued for the next hundred years right down to the present day, when our government has invaded and bombed Iraq in order, it says, to bring democracy to the Iraqis.

The Medicine of History

NEPO: In your memoir, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, you start by mentioning a lecture you gave here in Kalamazoo in 1992.² You speak pointedly about Columbus and his vicious treatment of the Arawak Indians. There's a passage where you talk about how this represented the worst values of Western civilization—greed, violence, exploitation, racism, conquest, hypocrisy. And I agree. You also note that in a larger context, although the worst things are often emphasized in a way that dishearten us, somehow our spirit, not just as Americans but as human beings, refuses to surrender. And so if we see those values as a social disease and the myths that you raise of exceptionalism and superiority as stages of that disease, I'd love to hear you imagine what some of the medicines might be. What would be the countermyths that we could hope to aspire to, or live into, that would affect education? How do we educate ourselves and our children out of the myth of innocence and exceptionalism and superiority?

ZINN: Of course, one critical way in which we educate ourselves and others out of these damaging myths is through what we've been talking about: history. When you inform young people, or anybody for that matter, with as many perspectives as possible of events, you start to approach a more vital sense of truth. But this is not the history we are taught. For instance, anyone who has been schooled in the American educational system has learned that Columbus was a great man, and therefore we have all these statues of Columbus around the country and all these cities named Columbus.

So how do you dislodge these myths? Well, you do that as soon as people learn some of the history that they did not learn in grade school—that I did not learn in grade school or, even, in graduate school. Now kids in elementary school, if they have wise teachers, can learn what I did not learn in graduate school. And so not only do they learn about that specific event—Columbus and the Arawaks—but it leads them to question so many other things about innocence. In 1992 during the quincentennial, which was five hundred years after Columbus landed in the Americas, a teacher on the West Coast named Bill Bigelow took leave from his teaching job and made it a kind of crusade to go and talk to other teachers around the country about the Columbus myth. I remember that he told me about this student in his class who wrote in a little essay, "Well, if I've been lied to about Columbus, now I'm wondering what else I've been lied

to about.” You see, once students learn to be skeptical of one myth that they’ve been told, it suggests the idea of skepticism in general. Then they learn that one of the great myths is about the Founding Fathers and how they created this wonderful document, the Constitution, which has guided us through these several hundred years. It’s a myth of fifty-five wise men who got together and created this wonderful document. And Ronald Reagan carried this myth even further on the occasion of the bicentennial of the Constitution when he said the Constitution was so perfect that it could only have been fashioned by the guiding hand of God.³ And I thought this was going a little too far.

In truth, if students look further, they begin to learn some history about the making of the Constitution. They can read Charles Beard’s book, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*.⁴ They can learn that the men who put together the Constitution did not really represent the country very well; they did not represent poor people or black people or Indians or women. They can learn that the Founding Fathers fashioned a document that was really put together in an atmosphere of fear on their part—fear triggered by a rebellion that had just taken place in western Massachusetts. In the very year before they got together in Philadelphia to make the Constitution, there had been this rebellion of farmers, Shays’s Rebellion, in western Massachusetts and similar uprisings in other places in the country. They were worried about more acts of rebellion. So they wanted to fashion a document that would suppress rebellion and maintain law and order for the benefit of slaveholders and western landowners. Well, as soon as you give people historical information, the myths begin to fall apart.

NEPO: So in a way we could say that the experience of truth might counter the myth of innocence?

ZINN: Yes, and I really have this faith that the truth trumps lies. This is what gives me hope today when people say that the media and the government have such command of the instruments of propaganda. I constantly hear that they have such control of the airwaves, television and radio, and the press that it’s a rather hopeless situation to inform a misinformed American public. But my argument is that although they have a lot of control, they don’t have complete control. We have apertures; we have openings. We have alternative ways of getting information to people. And we have alternative radio stations and newspapers and the Internet and so on. And even though our means—our instruments—are less numerous and weaker than theirs, the fact that we’re telling the truth will

be more important. That is, truth has a power over falsehood that will win out. I guess that's the kind of faith I have in teaching: even though you're teaching against a mountain of misinformation, if you teach the truth, that mountain will at one point crumble.

Our Interests Are the Same

NEPO: I think of Keats's famous line—"Beauty is truth, truth beauty"—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know"⁵—that truth is one of those instruments. From what you're saying, it seems that another antidote or healthy avenue to counter the myth of being exceptional and superior might be the experience of commonness and humility. It's interesting that the sense of commonness in our culture is jaded, as it tends to mean something less than or mediocre, when really it's what unifies us—the things we have in common. Because you were mentioning, as you do in all your work, those unspoken voices, it made me think of the truth of our commonness and the authority that arises from that. I am speaking not of the typical sense of authority but rather of the deeper kind of authority that comes from our common human experience.

ZINN: Yes, it's interesting, your point about the word *common*. It's come to have a pejorative tone. And of course, it should be exalted—the idea of all of us having something in common, having interests in common, having a common sense of what is right and wrong, having, really, common desires. I want to recognize that as human beings, we are so much alike in what we want. This makes us different from artificial entities like corporations and governments. They do not have the same interests or capacities. They do not have the same feelings or awareness. They do not have the same human desires and needs. They are therefore alien to us. But as human beings, we are just ordinary, common people; we all have something in common. It's that process of discovery that's important. When we discover that we have something in common, that discovery gives us enormous power—not a power over other people but a power to withstand certain entities that try to control us. I think that's one of the crucial jobs of anyone who cares about human beings in the world—to try to help people understand what they have in common.

I remember the brief moment in French history in 1871 when the Commune of Paris was formed and when people really acted in common—in community—for themselves. They created an amazing, though short, period of equality and justice in Paris, where people gathered together every day and talked with one another. No one would accept salaries

much higher than anybody else, and they took advantage of the latest scientific thing, which was a balloon, and they floated a balloon over the countryside, and the balloon dropped leaflets to French peasants, and the leaflets had a very simple sentence on them. Those leaflets dropped all over the countryside said, “Our interests are the same.” I think that is the most important message we can address to one another. We are all human beings. Our interests are the same. Our problem is to discern which artificial interests have been drummed into us, like the interest of accumulating a lot of money or the interest of being a stronger country than any other or even the interest of being more beautiful than anyone else. These false, artificial interests have been inculcated. I can’t think of anything more important to do than to be able to resist these false interests and to declare our common interests.

NEPO: I think that really speaks to what our sincere intention is with this whole project. It is to try to open up conversation about those common interests. I’ve been drawn myself into finding models of community, like the one you just mentioned, that have worked. I am not looking for utopias but for moments in time when healthy common interest has been the guiding influence. I often wonder, Where do we turn for that kind of social education? Where can we go to look, to study actual examples and case studies of community? I know there are many you refer to in your work—moments in history where people have come together in ways that work.

ZINN: It’s true that we don’t have a lot of examples of long-term situations that we would consider models of how people can come together. But we have more examples than we are told. Certainly, we’re not educated about those examples. Certainly, people are not educated about the Paris Commune. People are not told about the early months of 1936 in Spain at the very beginning of the Spanish Civil War, described by George Orwell in his book *Homage to Catalonia*.⁶ This was a period in which you might say that the anarchists of Catalonia—the anarchists of Barcelona—took over the city, but not in a controlling or dominant way. Rather, they took over in a different sense. In those months in Barcelona, there was no overarching authority. There was no police state. People policed themselves. There was virtually no crime. People shared things. There was no stark inequality. People traded goods and services and took care of one another. And Orwell describes it in such a beautiful way in his book. When you have things like that happen, even for a brief period, it suggests that it could happen for a longer period. When you think of

it, that's the way things operate in the scientific world, so why not socially? As soon as the Wright brothers could keep a plane aloft for twenty-seven seconds, everyone knew from that point on that a plane might be kept aloft for hours. It's the same socially and culturally. It's not just instances like the Paris Commune or the Spanish enclave of commonality in Barcelona. We've had countless incidents in history where people have joined together in social movements and created a spirit of camaraderie or a spirit of sharing and togetherness and have absented themselves, even momentarily, from the world of greed and domination. If true community can stay aloft for twenty-seven seconds, it is only a matter of time before such a community can last for hours. It is only a matter of time before a beloved community, as Martin Luther King Jr. described,⁷ can come into being.

For the seven years when I lived in the South, between 1956 and 1963, I became involved in a southern movement that was an almost all-black movement against racial segregation. It is known today as the civil rights movement and it was an astonishing time of commonality. Young people in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, who gave up their college careers and gave up any other sort of traditional ambitions they might have had, dropped whatever they were doing and went into the Deep South. Together they set up Freedom Houses. They lived communally in these Freedom Houses and shared things and went out into the community and talked to other people and tried to draw these other people, black people, into this sort of circle of action and activity, to do away with racial segregation. I have seen this in other movements. I think the women's movement in this country has consisted to a great extent of small groups of women getting together, sharing things, sharing ideas, and being totally honest and open with one another. I see these caring actions as little gems in an ocean that seems overwhelming. Yet I think they have a great future.

Being an American

NEPO: Regarding the American dream and the kinds of things we've been talking about, what do you think is at its core? Or what's missing?

ZINN: Certainly, on the one hand, we've had a degree of freedom of expression in this country that should be cherished. This has not been true in so many places in the world. Yet on the other hand, we've had a system starting with the Founding Fathers that has largely worked in the interest of the rich and the powerful. In those days, it worked in the interest of the

slaveholders. Still, it has not been a totalitarian system. It has had enough avenues of freedom for people to work in and to tunnel their way out into situations where change could take place. So we haven't been a society closed to change. Yet though there have been openings and apertures in the system, it's been a controlled society. But the control has not been total. Because these avenues and apertures and openings and possibilities exist, when people take advantage of them—though it's not easy—it becomes possible for people to make changes in their lives.

Consider working people and the fact that they have no economic rights. That's right. They were given no economic rights under the Constitution. In 1944, when Franklin D. Roosevelt was running for president again, he alluded to the fact that there was no economic bill of rights,⁸ and we still have none. The result of having no such rights in the Constitution means that working people have to gain these rights for themselves. The openings and apertures that working people have found reside in something that they had to really enlarge and create for themselves—things like the right to strike and to withhold their labor and thereby to insist that their employers, however powerful, give in to them under the threat of the plant simply not operating, and efforts to lower their hours and raise their wages in order to create better conditions of life for themselves. We've used the freedom of speech that we've had. Even though it's been difficult to bring other people together, union organizers have fought for the right to freedom of speech. They were very often arrested just for getting up on street corners or going into plants and talking to people. But we've had enough freedom in this country to be able to organize social movements that would enable us to do away with racial segregation, win more rights for women, and secure rights for disabled people, as we did not long ago with the Americans with Disabilities Act.⁹

NEPO: As I think about what you've been saying and the earlier notions of the myth of innocence and exceptionalism that you raised, it occurs to me that the myth of freedom, as it's written about and idealized, is at times starkly different from the experience of freedom that many ordinary people have. I'm thinking of the conventional notion that goes something like, "Oh, well, if you don't have what you need, it's incumbent on you to work harder for it," which doesn't take into account what we've been talking about—the lack of economic rights in many cases. In actuality, I'm wondering about the nature of the gap between the myth of freedom and the experience of freedom. It's interesting that in a culture that sanctifies all of the benefits of freedom, the only way that common people can gain those benefits, at times, is by being forced to withhold their gifts. So I'm

wondering if these different myths and these different aspects of social disease warrant more discussion.

ZINN: I think they do. I think one of the things that is worth talking about more is the utility of the myth. If you have a people who are completely controlled and helpless, you don't even have to give them myths. But if you have people who might create situations that the authorities don't like, you have to create myths to control them. As soon as you create myths, you raise the possibility that people will take the myths seriously. If you create a myth of liberty and democracy, then even though the reality is that you don't have them, the myth becomes something that is desirable and that people will work at so that when they learn or realize that the myth has not been fulfilled—that they don't have these things—they have something to work toward. In other words, they see the gap between the myth and the reality. If there's no myth—no sort of utopian idea, even a false one—then there is only your reality. Of course, then you might create your own myths. But if the society itself, in order to control you, has given you a myth of freedom and democracy, then you can hold it to account. You can say, You promised me this. You put into the Constitution that I should have freedom of speech, and I'm going to hold you to it. When the police officer arrests me for distributing a leaflet on the street, I am going to protest and appeal to my fellow citizens and point to the First Amendment to the Constitution—because they can then see a gap between the myth and the reality. They may be aroused to erase that gap and make the myth real. I guess I'm suggesting that the myth has its social uses. You might say the United States stays possible by creating more admirable myths than a lot of other places that didn't even bother to create myths. For example, tsarist Russia did not create a myth of liberty and democracy. But the United States of America did, and by doing that, it also sowed the seeds of change.

NEPO: Different thinkers have spoken of this gap. I'm thinking now of Carl Jung, who in the *Undiscovered Self*, which he dictated when he was eighty, put forth this troubling though fascinating thought.¹⁰ Coming from Europe and experiencing the United States in the 1920s for the first time, he made this observation that America was a culture that in its creation was based and built on the unit of freedom we call the individual. And yet his experience of modern America was that we had also created an institution or an engine of America that survives by feeding on individuals—by eating the individual. So although the dream of America exalts the individual, the very engine of America devours the very thing it is based

on. This is Jung's effort to describe the social disease that eats away at the heart of America.

ZINN: That's a startling idea.

Several Americas

NEPO: If we look at America as a young country, how might we imagine its development? Can a nation, like a person, individuate and mature as it goes through life? If so, how would you describe America in this process? Where is America developmentally? And where does it need to mature?

ZINN: Well, there's a problem of several Americas that sort of run alongside one another and develop alongside one another. This always creates a problem when people ask questions about "America" or about how they feel about "America." It's seldom clear which America people are talking about. When I think about the development of the country, there's this enormous, impressive, truly awesome technological development that has made this country so advanced in science and technology and gadgets and standard of living, at least for a lot of people. That process has gone on pretty much unimpeded, with dips here and there involving economic crises. But basically, the development of the country over these several hundred years has been onward and upward in technological advance, material production, and gross domestic product.

Then there's the other problem, which is more complicated: our moral development. There you find a very difficult, slower, uneven pattern. Let me put it another way. Our moral development has certainly not kept pace with our technological development. One symptom of that is that the huge advantages of increased economic expansion and production—those huge benefits—have not gone to a significant part of the population. The benefits of this technological revolution have been distributed very, very unevenly. So from a moral standpoint, the development has been a skewed one.

Then there's the other connection between the technological development and what I would call moral immaturity. I am referring here to the way in which the technology overwhelms our human values and human desires and gets in the way of people recognizing what is most important in their lives. There's a way in which the marvelous achievements and invention of machines and gadgets become an obstacle to people understanding themselves and other people. It gets in the way of people relat-

ing to one another as human beings. And so the moral development, oddly enough, is in one sense obstructed, hindered by the technological development.

And yet there's another kind of development or change that takes place in the history of the country that I think is positive. This centers on what I believe has been progress over these several hundred years in human relations, in spite of the obstacles put in the way by the emphasis on technology. For example, the sheer determination of people who have been oppressed to change their situation and the idealism of people who are not necessarily oppressed but who become sympathetic to those who are oppressed—this has acted, over the course of several hundred years, to do away with slavery. Ultimately, it took a long, long time—over two hundred years—to do away with slavery in this country. But over the long term, there's been a change in human relations that has come not because of but in spite of the technological development. And it has come because people have insisted on holding on to themselves and their values in spite of all the obstacles. So the determination to change things for the better, the determination to end racial inequality, the determination to help people who are in need, the determination to stop wars—I believe that these efforts, though proceeding in a zigzag way, with steps forward and back, have generally moved in a positive direction. That is, they have moved in a direction where the people of the country—Americans—keep recognizing more and more that people of all colors and religions and genders and sexual orientations and physical abilities all deserve an equal right to dignity and life. As I say, this goes on in zigzag fashion so that you have progress and you have regression.

We see this, for instance, in the recent wars. We've seen regression after what I consider a moral important development after the Vietnam War. At first there was the recognition by so many Americans of the brutality of war and of the intrusion of American power into the lives of other people. We reached a kind of high point in that of moral understanding. Then in the past several decades, there's been a regression with the wars that we've had, right up to the present war. Now I believe we're only beginning to come out of that and to move again in a direction of the American people rebelling against violence and war. So there are these different kinds of development that have been going on in different Americas, depending on what criteria you use.

When you ask what America needs in order to mature, I think first of a recognition of the limits of technological advance. One of the requirements of that recognition is to acknowledge that technological

advance—like automobiles, like munitions in the atmosphere, like the tearing down of forests and the mining of soil for more minerals—has been ruinous to the earth and therefore to our lives. I think in order to mature we need a growing recognition of the limits of what is called progress. Progress has too often been measured in technical terms and not in moral terms or human terms. So it will take a moral and human assessment of progress for America to mature.

Perhaps the most important thing needed for the American people to mature is a recognition that the United States is not unique in the world; we are not the city on the hill, we are not the beacon of light for the world. It's like a person who has become important and prosperous and successful suddenly looking at himself and saying, "You know, I'm not so great. And these other people around me who have not been so successful and so prosperous—they are really human beings just like me, and they deserve as much out of life as I deserve, even though I have garnered most of the material values, most of the material positions. But I don't really deserve it more than anybody else." I think the most important criterion for measuring that kind of maturity is to see to what extent Americans begin to recognize that people in other parts of the world are equal to us and deserve equal rights.

I was struck by the fact that recently President Bush—I think it was in the middle of January—proclaimed National Sanctity of Human Life Day while on that same day, as on so many days before and after, American soldiers were committing violence in Iraq.¹¹ And one of the things he said that day was "the Declaration of Independence proclaimed that all Americans are endowed by the Creator with the unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Well, this is interesting to me. All "Americans" have a right. How about everyone else? Now, the Declaration of Independence did not say "all Americans." The Declaration of Independence said, "All men are created equal." It did not limit rights by nationality. Jefferson was talking about the human race—everyone, not just Americans. So in order for the American people to really mature as human beings, I think it will take recognition of the oneness of the human race and of the need to discard this arrogance that we have about the superiority of the people born on this continent.

A Sense of Moral Progress

NEPO: This touches on a question that the civil rights activist and historian Vincent Harding posed: "How do we prepare ourselves inwardly to participate in the oneness of humanity?"¹²

ZINN: Yes, that's an important question. How do we prepare ourselves inwardly? I wish I knew. I suppose one way is to build up some defenses against the outside world—that is, to give our inner self some space and some peace and some time so that we can think without the incursion of an outside world that gets in the way of our most basic and important understandings of life. That is a very important part of our preparation, I think—to find the space to stay off these outside influences by which the world tells us to do this and go there, to accumulate this and think this way. We just need to create a space and time for ourselves to think back to who we are and what we really want.

NEPO: It seems that we need a different definition of progress. So in terms of moral development and human relations, how would you characterize progress there? As opposed to our more traditional technological progress, how would you characterize progress in these deeper domains?

ZINN: I guess you have to measure that progress by how we are looking at other human beings—by how we look at human beings as far removed from our situation as they can possibly be. That is, take the people who are at the farthest reaches of our universe—people who are absolutely strange to us in the way they look, in the language they speak, in their lack of material possessions, in their sickness—people who are just at the opposite end of the spectrum of health and prosperity. How we behave toward them, how we think about them, how we relate to them, what we do with them and for them—it seems to me that would be the ultimate test of how much progress we are making morally.

The Common Cradle of Concern

NEPO: One of the things that you speak about in your memoir is your experience of the Freedom Schools in Mississippi in 1964 during the civil rights movement. I know you've written wonderfully about that elsewhere.¹³ But I'd like to focus on the kind of deep, integrated education those Freedom Schools tried to evoke. You have said that both teachers and students there were aware that they talked with one another inside a "common cradle of concern." Can you speak about the common cradle of concern, what strengths and resources live there, and how we might access them together?

ZINN: I can sort of sum it up by saying it occurs when both the student and teacher begin to realize that regardless of the differences in their background and their education and their class or race or whatever, they

really care about the same things. And through that care, they begin to create a different kind of world, one that goes beyond being successful professionally. They both recognize that there are so many things wrong that need to be changed and that they want the same kinds of things in the world, all of which has to do with human equality and dignity and with a just and peaceful world.

The point in this particular case is that in those classroom situations, the teachers and the students shared a concern for the human race. They shared a concern for creating a different kind of world. They shared a concern for going beyond becoming successful upon graduation in the conventional sense of the word *success*. They discovered a common concern for having an effect on the world outside of their individual wants. They discovered and engaged a common recognition that there's so much that needs to be done.

Facing Ourselves Before Facing the World

NEPO: Your experience touches on the paradox that although we are each unique, as we go deeply and honestly inward, we find that common cradle of concern. This touches on so many notions within the wisdom traditions, such as the Hindu sense of "Thou Art That," that in the center we are the same.¹⁴ And I think of Martin Buber's notion of "I" and "Thou," which invokes that such a place of common concern appears when we regard each other as living centers and engage in authentic dialogue together.¹⁵

I think we have time for one more question. You've touched on this a little bit, but I still want to ask you directly. I know that your life experience goes all the way back to being a bombardier in World War II, and you've written so much about war, including your recent collection about artists and war.¹⁶ So I couch this with respect to September 11, 2001, and what happened on that day. You've written about this in regard to different times in history. It centers on the realization that we as Americans have also been on the other side of such events, such as Hiroshima and Nagasaki, our slow intervention in Germany, and our nonintervention in Rwanda. I could go on and on; there are too many examples. The question is, How do we as Americans—and I guess this is tied to the humility you were talking about earlier—learn to face ourselves?

ZINN: Well, I think a lot has to do with history and with learning our history. It's the wiping out of history that puts us in a position of facing

every new event as if there were nothing behind it. If nothing precedes an event—that is, if you don't understand the history behind it—it leads to a very shallow interpretation and a distorted reaction to that event. If you're faced with a horrible event like 9/11 and the deaths of those thousands of people and you have no history, there's a tendency to quickly react—to “do something,” however irrational, unproductive, or counter-productive it might be. You feel you must *do* something without ever stopping to examine why the event may have happened or what could possibly have motivated those people to commit such a horrendous act. But if you understand the history of terrible acts committed in the past and ask what are the motivations for them and what are the justifications for them, it might give you some clues to this latest event.

For instance, you mentioned Hiroshima and Nagasaki. If you were to look more closely into those events, you would find that the general sentiment is, “Well, everybody acknowledges that it was a terrible thing to kill several hundred thousand people with a bomb—men, women, children, innocent people—a terrible thing to do. What could possibly motivate the United States to do that?” Well, most Americans accept the fact that it was necessary to prevent a larger evil from taking place. That the evil of killing several hundred thousand people was justified by the fact that it was preventing something even worse. And so we were willing to kill several hundred thousand innocent people because we had some larger motive. When you think about it, this is what justifies so many awful inhuman acts in history. They are justified by the fact that they have to be done for some larger purpose. The atrocities that accompany religious wars have been justified because there's a larger metaphysical, theological, God-connected purpose that then enables entire nations to justify horrible crimes in the name of religion, including the Inquisition and the Crusades. In the case of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, you have the justification that it was saving lives—more lives than we were destroying.

When you think about it that way, you can say, “Well, these people who did this on 9/11, they must know—even the Koran says so—that you mustn't kill people.” But they think they have some larger purpose. This might lead us to think about the violence, and the point is, of course, not to justify what they have done but to understand it so that when we retaliate for the 9/11 event by going to war, we begin to realize that we are starting to think in the same way that the terrorists think. They were willing to kill people for some larger purpose, and we are willing to kill people, whether in Afghanistan or Iraq, for some larger purpose of deterring or stopping terrorism. Therefore, we are caught up in a cycle of similar justifications for violence, a cycle of violence where every element in the

cycle has a similar justification. And so history is important for making us examine what we are doing. History is also important for showing us that it's not simply a matter of some horrible people committing a horrible act against a nation that has been pure in its motive and its actions. Like it or not, 9/11 is part of a long sequence of violence in the world—violence committed by terrorist groups and violence committed by governments.

NEPO: So this really connects with what you were saying about the progress of moral development in human relations; with regard to our willingness to really open and listen to people as different as possible from us and really listen to the history and context they come from. In fact, our capacity to do this and mature is inextricably tied to how much our moral development can keep apace in spite of our technological development. This is the sort of inner and community progress that will allow us to face ourselves more.

ZINN: I think that's absolutely true. I suppose one of the reasons I've done so much in history, with history, writing history, is because I think that without the history, you lose perspective. You lose the ability to examine your own actions. Without such perspective, without such examination, Americans have been deprived of so much of their own history that it makes us unable to evaluate what we are doing today.

Notes

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- 2 Howard Zinn, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).
- 3 "Bicentennial Observance of the U.S. Constitution," CQ Electronic Library, CQ Historic Documents Series Online Edition, hsd87-0001161275. Originally published in *Historic Documents of 1987* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1988).
- 4 Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: Free Press, 1963). (Originally published 1913)
- 5 John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," lines 49–50.
- 6 George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt, 1952). (Originally published 1938)
- 7 Martin Luther King Jr., "Beloved Community," in *Glossary of Nonviolence* [<http://www.thekingcenter.org/prog/non/glossary.html>]. 2004.
- 8 Franklin D. Roosevelt, Message to Congress on the State of the Union, Jan. 11, 1944 [<http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/011144.html>].
- 9 Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, U.S. Code 42 (1990), §§ 12101 et seq.
- 10 Carl G. Jung, *The Undiscovered Self* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990). (Originally published 1957)
- 11 George W. Bush, proclamation of Sunday, Jan. 16, 2005, as National Sanctity of Human Life Day [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/01/20050115-1.html>].

- 12 Vincent Harding, dialogue at the Fetzer Institute, June 3, 2004.
- 13 Howard Zinn, *The Zinn Reader* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1997).
- 14 See, for example, "Thou Art That," *Aspen*, 1971, 10(2) [<http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen10/thou.html>].
- 15 Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribner, 1970). (Originally published 1923)
- 16 Howard Zinn, *Artists in Times of War* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003).

The Author

HOWARD ZINN was a shipyard worker and an Air Force bombardier before he went to college under the GI Bill of Rights, studying history and political science at New York University. He taught at Spelman College in Atlanta for seven years, becoming involved in the southern civil rights movement. Moving north, he taught at Boston University and was active in the movement against the war in Vietnam. He has written over a dozen books, the best known of which is *A People's History of the United States*. He has been a visiting professor in France and Italy and has lectured in Japan and South Africa, and his work has been translated into many languages. He is also a playwright. His play *Emma*, about the anarchist-feminist Emma Goldman, has been produced in Boston, New York, London, and Tokyo, and his play *Marx in Soho* has been produced widely in the United States and abroad. He has received the Upton Sinclair Award and the Lannan Literary Prize. He lives in the Boston area with his wife, the painter Roslyn Zinn. They have two children and five grandchildren.

OTHER WORKS BY HOWARD ZINN

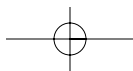
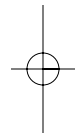
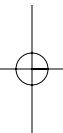
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The Interviewer

MARK NEPO is a poet and philosopher who has taught in the fields of poetry and spirituality for more than thirty years. He has written several books. Most recently, he published *The Exquisite Risk* (Harmony Books, 2005), which *Spirituality and Health* magazine cited as one of the Best Spiritual Books of 2005, calling it “one of the best books we’ve ever read on what it takes to live an authentic life.”

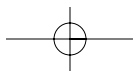
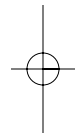
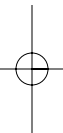
Nepo is also the editor of *Deepening the American Dream: Reflections on the Inner Life and Spirit of Democracy*, a collection of essays published by Jossey-Bass. His work has been translated into French, Portuguese, Japanese, and Danish. Nepo serves as a program officer for the Fetzer Institute. To learn more about Mark Nepo and his work, please visit www.MarkNepo.com.



Fetzer Institute

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ANTHOLOGY ON
DEEPENING THE AMERICAN DREAM

**Deepening the American Dream:
Reflections on the Inner Life
and Spirit of Democracy**

Edited by Mark Nepo

A collection of reflections on the spiritual meaning of being American in today's world from some of our most respected thinkers: Gerald May, Jacob Needleman, Elaine Pagels, Robert Inchausti, Parker Palmer, and others. The book explores the inner life of democracy, the way citizens are formed, and considers the spiritual aspects of the American dream—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

This thought-provoking volume of essays challenges us to ponder the American Dream and discuss the spiritual values that can help transform the country. The interplay between history, spirituality, and current events is what makes this volume such a soul-stirring experience. It is indeed hopeful and salutary that this cultural document puts so much emphasis on spiritual values as being crucial to the health and enduring value of democracy in the twenty-first century.

—*Spirituality & Health Magazine*

Deepening the American Dream communicates a determined and magnanimous solidarity to a fragmented age of confusion and escalating resentments. The collection is . . . a gesture of peace and goodwill that summons us to come together. It's a powerfully uplifting book that shines light in the direction of incarnate hope. That rare happening of people actually talking to each other. I highly recommend it.

—*The Christian Century*

ESSAYS ON DEEPENING THE AMERICAN DREAM

Essay #1, Winter 2003

Two Dreams of America

Jacob Needleman

As the inaugural essay in the series, the question is put: “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*?”

Essay #2, Spring 2003

**From Cruelty to Compassion:
The Crucible of Personal Transformation**

Gerald G. May

This essay is a compelling journey to the perennial bottom of who we are, at our best and our worst, and how to use that knowledge to live together from a place of spirit and compassion.

Essay #3, Fall 2003

**Footprints of the Soul:
Uniting Spirit with Action in the World**

Carolyn T. Brown

This essay speaks deeply about the gifts and frictions that exist between our authentic self and the society we live in and grow in, and how returning to the well of spirit keeps forming who we are in the world.

Essay #4, Winter 2004

**Created Equal:
Exclusion and Inclusion in the American Dream**

Elaine H. Pagels

In this essay the renowned religious historian Elaine Pagels provides a convincing exploration of the ways we have interpreted equality as expressed in the Declaration of Independence. More than ever, she says, we need to ask, who is included in the American dream? What do we make of this

dream in a waking reality? How shall we take this vision to shape our sense of who we are—as a people, a nation, a community? She calls us to deepen our understanding of the American dream and commit ourselves to extending it to all people worldwide who would share in its promises, blessings, and responsibilities.

Essay #5, Spring 2004

**Breaking the Cultural Trance:
Insight and Vision in America**

Robert Inchausti

This essay is a convincing look at how we see and, just as important, how living in America has impaired our deepest seeing, and how education is the sacred medicine entrusted in each generation with restoring that deeper sight that lets us know that we are each other.

Essay #6, Fall 2004

**The Grace and Power of Civility:
Commitment and Tolerance
in the American Experience**

David M. Abshire

In a time when our country is more polarized than ever, the former ambassador to NATO, a historian himself, traces the history of commitment and tolerance in an effort to revitalize the respect, listening, and dialogue that constitute civility. “Which, then, is the true America?” he asks, “The America of division or the America of unity? The America of endless public and partisan warfare or the America of cooperation, civility, and common purpose? The America of many or the America of one?”

Essay #7, Winter 2005

**Opening the Dream:
Beyond the Limits of Otherness**

Charles Gibbs

This essay explores America’s relationship with the rest of the world. As executive director of the United Religions Initiative, Rev. Gibbs proposes that “The future of America cannot be separated from the future of the rest of the world. There are no longer chasms deep enough or walls high enough to protect us or to protect others from us. So what do we do? We might begin by seeing ourselves as citizens of Earth and children of the abiding Mystery at the heart of all that is.”

Essay #8, Spring 2005

**The Politics of the Brokenhearted:
On Holding the Tensions of Democracy**

Parker J. Palmer

With his usual penetrating insight, Parker Palmer speaks to the conflicts and contradictions of twenty-first-century life that are breaking the American heart and threatening to compromise our democratic values.

Essay #9, Winter 2006

The Almost Chosen People

Huston and Kendra Smith

In this far-reaching essay, renowned historian of religion, Huston Smith, and his wife, the scholar Kendra Smith, trace the American sense of liberty as a spiritual concept that has both inspired us and eluded us through a checkered history in which we have trampled many in the name of the very equality and freedom we hold so sacred. They trace the erosion of the American Dream in the twentieth century and look toward our inevitable membership in the global family of nations that is forming in the world today.

Essay #10, Spring 2006

Prophetic Religion in a Democratic Society

Robert N. Bellah

Steering between what distinguished sociologist of religion Robert Bellah calls “Enlightenment fundamentalists” on the one hand and religious fundamentalists on the other, this essay argues against both the common secularist view that religion should be excluded from public life and the dogmatic view that would exclude all secular and religious views except one. Instead it proposes a more moderate, nuanced, and robust role for faith and religion in the common life of America and Americans.

Essay #11, Fall 2006

The Common Cradle of Concern

Howard Zinn

In the winter of 2004, the legendary historian Howard Zinn explored the nature of being an American today with Mark Nepo through several conversations. This essay gathers the siftings of those conversations put together and edited by both Zinn and Nepo into a meditation on America, moral progress, and the myths of freedom called “The Common Cradle of Concern.”

ESSAYS ON EXPLORING A GLOBAL DREAM

Essay #1, Spring 2006

**Bridges, Not Barriers:
The American Dream and the Global Community**

Abdul Aziz Said

As the inaugural essay in the global series, this leading peace studies educator and scholar examines both the American Dream and the emerging global community with insight into the complex state of international relations, while envisioning a shift in world values that might birth a common world based on the spiritual conception of love and cooperation.

