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Mythology

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The Land of Opportunity: Dream or Myth

It is hard to imagine anyone who does not want a better life in the form of work, home, income, or health. Even *Gilgamesh*, the first written myth in existence, depicts the story of a godlike king who is not satisfied with his lot in life and seeks immortality. Maybe it is part of our nature as humans to live in a constant state of desire, always looking to achieve some new goal. If that is the case, then the American dream is an understandable expression of the human desire for a better life. James Truslow Adams' creation of the phrase "American Dream" in 1931 (Ellis and Guettler) was the articulation of this human impulse and gave collective form to the lives of all who looked to America as hope for a better future.

Like a phoenix rising from the ashes of the Great Depression and two world wars, the American Dream took wing in the form of the G.I. Bill, the 1934 Housing Act, and F.D. Roosevelt's 1934 State of the Union address. As seven million WWII veterans returned home from war, they seized the opportunity to attend college, buy a home, and start a family (Ellis and Guettler). The timing was right and the resources abundant. This collective dream seemed to be attainable by all. Everyone was on board and the cultural myth supported the well-being of everyone who worked hard and played by the rules. Unfortunately, even during this explosive growth in opportunity, there were Americans in positions of power who worked intentionally against the fulfillment of the American Dream for African Americans.

From 1877 to 1960, Jim Crow laws permeated the nation with the express purpose of

Segregating blacks from whites and limiting the African American's freedom to the pursuit of happiness, a freedom that we as a collective body had decided was an inalienable birthright (Pilgrim). Did African Americans have the right to pursue their American Dream? Yes – but not with the same expression of freedom as white citizens.

In the 21st century, we have made gains against Jim Crow laws, but the persistence of some to limit the freedom of others' pursuit of happiness makes the playing field far from level. In her article, "The American Dream and the Economic Myth," Betty Sue Flowers identifies a shift in our cultural understanding of this dream:

In the Economic Myth, the aim is not goodness, as in the religious myth, or truth, as in the democratic myth, or excellence, as in the hero myth, but "more." Over time and with the help of advertising, Americans have been taught to believe that happiness depends on having "more" in the material world. And a corollary to aiming for more material goods is the drive towards perfection.

As an American woman living in this culture, it is easy to understand that what Flowers says is true. The 1950s view of hearth and home has been turned on its head. The original family aspiring for the American Dream worked together to achieve a collective happiness and knew their traditional gender and family roles. Things were less complex intellectually and those considered the American "norm" could achieve this modest dream with the help of each other and the government.

In 21st century, the American government places undue financial burdens on the majority of the populace. Economic growth has erred on the side of the wealthiest one percent while the rest of the nation wonders how to keep a home they purchased or a job they have invested energy in for years. As Flowers notes, "In an economic myth, we observe that he who has the most money gets the best justice; and, as critical legal theory has taught us, law is essentially a conversation not about justice but about power." This has become especially evident in the

treatment of black youths such as Trayvon Martin (Weinstein) and Michael Brown (Von Drehle). The entire city of Ferguson, Missouri is “protected” by a white police force which harasses young black males regularly. “Race relations, often harmonious among neighbors, are frequently tense between black residents and the mostly Caucasian city officials” (Von Drehle). When the system put in place to protect the rights of all to pursue happiness is corrupt, there are citizens who do not have the same means or rights to pursue happiness. The concept of the American Dream may exist for all Americans, but the reality of the American Dream does not. This is where Flowers’ economic myth remains precisely that – a myth, and the American Dream is an elusive star on which some hang their hopes.

Works Cited

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