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The American Dream In a Recession

For many people, the idea of the American Dream comes from stories and tales portrayed by the media showing American individuals starting in poverty and working towards a goal, acquiring seemingly great wealth and power in a short period of time. People are inspired and believe that they can follow suit and thereby setting out to accomplish their goals, what it is that they want to do and believing that it will come naturally.

As Americans, we've had the fortunate benefit of other successful individuals hard work and willingness to aid us when it comes time for us to start working on our own goals. In turn, we've created a system in which people help each other succeed, making it easier for more people to achieve their goal. Since more people have met the minimum standard, the bar has been raised and connotations of money and power have been placed on top of the fundamental ideal; life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

People come to America from other countries to escape oppression, slavery or persecution. In China, married couples are allowed to only have one child, in contrast to America where families are only constrained by their financial budget or wants. It's still their choice as to how many children they wish to have or how many luxuries they wish to do without. My family escaped from Prussia when the Nazi's were taking over and killing all of Jewish decent. They

came to America to live. Life is something we take for granted here, it's not that way in other countries.

We're also fortunate enough to be able to pursue what we desire in spite of others beliefs. By law, people aren't barred from jobs or other activities because of race, gender, sexual orientation or political affiliation. There may be some that have requirements where a physical handicap won't let you into the field, but in general, this isn't an issue either. When administrations or hierarchies of power change, people are still allowed to maintain their positions. A contrast is portrayed in the story of Trung Dung when wartime Vietnam ended and "[t]here was no work for the wife of a former enemy[.]" (Rather, 311) Dung's mother lost her position because there was a radical shift in the control of the country. Here, we're able to keep our positions, our identities, when the structure changes outside of our control.

In society today, we perceive happiness as to how much wealth or power we can acquire. There is a far more fundamental form. We're fortunate to be able to work for what we want, but in working for what we want, we have to work to maintain a minimal level of living in order to strive for more. In Weber's essay, "Education and the American Dream," he takes note to what Bill Clinton said in regard to quality of opportunity which "in his speech, Bill Clinton did not say – nor does the Dream imply – that financial success or even a minimal standard of living should be *guaranteed* to everyone." (qtd. Weber, 235) Even without power, we can take solace in that we're allowed to walk down the street and feel the sunshine, or take a drive down the coast or across state lines. There's no higher authority telling us we can't go on our way.

As society has grown as a whole, we've been able to accommodate more and more people to the basic level. Since people are competitive by nature; we've set our standards higher. The phrase "you can't go anywhere without a college education" has come about because of

more and more people are graduating high school. Back in the 1800's saying "he only has an 8th grade education" meant something, as few people could actually attain such a level of education. We've made it easier to attain higher levels of education as are not available in other countries, as shown in Dung's story, "Trung wanted something more. He dreamed of pursuing higher education. Looking around him, he began to see that he would not be able to reach his dream in his homeland." (Rather, 311) Dung wanted something more than could be offered in his homeland, so he set his sights here, where education is commonplace.

People's success will bring others up as well. When one person succeeds in a particular area, they can use that success to help another person succeed in some manner. When that other person succeeds in some aspect, they can help someone else succeed in some other manor, and so on and so forth. For instance, let's say I made a lot of money. I could purchase a large house and let others live with me while they're trying to do what it is that they want to do. If I were to further medicine research, design a car that could be made affordably and break down far less often than cars today, or write an operating system that didn't have near as many bugs in it; I would be helping others by taking out an aspect of something that they would use to succeed and make it easier for them to use to their advantage.

There comes a point where the minimum standard is so high people start looking to that as the starting point and ignoring what's underneath. What happens is like a building that's been built too top heavy, the foundation starts to degrade and the building collapses in on its self. When the economy collapses people are less able to help others as they're more focused on their own situation. Even worse is when people aren't able to help others and are also forced to cut back in their daily routine in order to accommodate the needs of tomorrow. If someone likes to eat out every day at higher end restaurants and has suddenly received a pay cut, they're forced to

take on a different/second job to be able to afford the luxury. They could also do without an aspect of their normal life to compensate or change the type of restaurants they frequent as to offset eating their money. For some, this means not going to the restaurant at all. When someone loses the ability to maintain their acquired tastes in living, because of a pay cut, losing a job or otherwise, their whole look on what they consider makes them happy will change, or they'll just end up bitter and miserable.

In some cases, people are successful enough to build a corporation. Corporations are a means to helping many people achieve their own goals at once. In a recession, there's a less abundance of wealth to circulate in return for product or services. Employment is therefore less readily available as the corporation is managing its finances by cutting its employees hours and positions to survive. It's imperative that the corporation does survive though, as it can help some through a recession and be a place of employment opportunity when conditions improve. It's unfortunate but necessary that a corporation can be forced to downsize and require more individuals than normal to fend for themselves.

The interpretation of the American Dream depends greatly on the individual whom you talk to and their experiences. Mostly, it depends on the change in their experience. If someone starts out in a poor, harsh environment, the American Dream is stability, and the opportunity to work for it. For someone who's parents were hard working individuals providing a stable environment, the Dream is to excel in a career and become more wealthy to provide luxuries on top of a stable environment, in Katharine Seelye's essay, "What Happens to the American Dream in a Recession?" she notes, "fewer people now say that they are better off than their parents were at their age or that their children will be better off than they are." It all boils down to that America offers the dream of what you want. Typically, what we want is more than

what we have, and if we can find what it is that is more and will make us happy, America is the place we can pursue it.

The American Dream is in the form of a perspective, where we are and where we want to be. Coming from where we are, the dream is what enables us to want more, it lets us think about how we are going to get to where we want to be. There are parts we take for granted, such as being alive and not persecuted. It's the pursuit of happiness that creates so many different interpretations of the dream that it's easy to see why it's been distorted from its original form. To the individual, the dream is in the perspective of where we are and where we want to go. Granted, we still have to play by the rules, but we can put the rules in order that suits our purpose, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. We can keep building until the image is good enough for us and then enjoy it. Regardless of the outside influences, the dream is still that of more. In it's purest form, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, America's reputation lives on.