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A Genealogy of Personal Development in Modern America

Kelsey Binder

Self Development

A term often interchangeably used with ‘personal growth,’ is usually thought of as a private desire for change, requiring individual action. Self-help books line the shelves of stores and influence Americans through social media platforms, ubiquitously fabricating a common theme: what one requires for personal growth is solely up to the individual. An essential element to understanding individual desire for growth, is to remember that individual values are shaped by society; any private journey of the self is influenced by an external force. With a critical lens one can see the influential patterns that take hold of those who choose radical change in order to focus on achieving what is believed to be “the good life.”

As we confess to identifying with these personal stories situated throughout history, we can acknowledge that our culture is willing to abandon all things familiar—loved ones, careers, homes—in search of self-fulfillment. How are we seduced into such a yearning and how should we know if we are successful once we leave? An answer lies in the patterns found through examining individual personal growth journeys. Our culture’s fluctuating attitudes towards the erratic shape of the American Dream influence the motivations that generate self-developmental journeys and supply our culture’s current definition of successful personal growth.

The American Dream’s Social Landscape:

Thanks to the theoretical work of Henri Lefebvre, we have an understanding of how our social spaces are fabricated from the power of social interaction. Thanks to the theoretical work of Henri Lefebvre, we have an understanding of how our social spaces are fabricated from the power of social interaction.

Flashes of Influence:

Since stories act as social influencers, a nation must understand that the fate of the individual relies on the collective to hear this message that’s being thrown into society’s scope repeatedly. It’s found within the flashes of novels, movies and song lyrics. For instance, The Lumineers’ music video for their well-admired song, “Sleep on the Floor,” has influenced many audiences and flashed through various landscapes in the form of popular media.

It’s in the simple stories: two young people a fear of being stuck in a town rejecting change, the lust to abandon home and find something better—told in quick, bursting, hypnotizing flashes on the screens found in homes, restaurants, shared via our virtual lives, popping up on the small LCD screens we carry in our pockets, capturing public heart strings in a mesmerizing moment, causing a pause and a curiosity; we ask ourselves, ‘what else is possible?’

The current American Dream to create a more accepting social landscape is difficult. For not a single one of us can grow as limitlessly and prosperously as we may wish without the inclusion of the whole, without listening to the mobility of stories—how they leave echoes reverberating off mountains and travel towards each coast. Heat Moon writes, “I sometimes heard human voices that showed not the power of visions but of revision, the power to see again and revise” (399). It’s time to revise, individually and socially, through our journeys of personal growth.

Works Cited: