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A Genealogy of Self-Development in Modern America: Influences of the American Dream

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Dr. Vogel.

American Modernism: Research Project

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A Genealogy of Self-Development in Modern America:
Influences of the American Dream.

A man donates his savings to charity and escapes into the desolate wilderness. Another sets out on a country-wide journey to gather stories from people in the corners of America, diminishing the routine of his old life. Decades earlier, a 1900's author illustrates a character called by a desire to change her life and drives over the tough terrain of unpaved America in search of it. The focus of a popular music video from 2016 features two young people enthralled by the lust to abandon their homes in search of *more*.

This concept, modernly defined as '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.

We must first unpack the undulating waves of the American Dream from its beginning and into modernity: The Dream is not a solid thing. Rather, it's a series of cross roads and overlapping social play which coaches every generation, causing a ripple effect of reaction—whether acceptance or rebellion. Cal Jillson helps us understand the chronology of the American Dream in his book, *The American Dream: In History, Politics, and Fiction*, by first reminding the reader of America at its birth and how it resembled an ideal constructed by our Founders: “ ‘That all Men are created equal, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.’ ” (3). However, during its rise to the wealthiest and most prosperous nation, its citizens became the embodiment of greed and corruption in the face of a competition for social mobility. Jillson describes the fall of the dream as “individualism and competition displac[ing] community and cooperation as men fought to tame the continent, seize its wealth, and control the course of its development” (26). Thus, the Dream no longer served the population of America; it only opened its gates to those who could easily acquire power, money, and high status. Many Americans believe we still stand on this unstable, shaky foundation of a nation losing its hope. What space is left for personal growth?

To understand how the Dream affects the shape of individual self-development we must first unpack two theorists: Henri Lefebvre and John Jackson. *The Construction of Space* conceptualized by Lefebvre, who claims, “Social space is a social construct” and that the social spaces humans inhabit (our economic, familial, political spaces) are things of our own creation. Lefebvre is simply acknowledging that we have the ability to desire something in vivid

visualization—such as road systems—and manufacture its creation in our physical world (by paving roads and inventing automobiles for travel.) Visualization is key in personal growth. Secondly, John Jackson describes the social nature of society’s alternating shape in his book *Landscape in Sight*: “A [social] landscape is not a natural feature of the environment but a synthetic space, a man-made system, functioning and evolving not according to natural laws but to serve a community” (305). Through these lenses of societal impact, it’s possible to view the American Dream an ideal that past generations created to serve as an idealized way of life and how the patterns of its societal influence can be found in various personal journeys.

For instance, Sinclair Lewis’s 1919 novel, *Free Air*, features Claire, whose actions reflect the constraints of the American Dream in the early twentieth century—its idealism of the righteous path towards a hard-working job, family and white picket fence leading to social status. For Claire—whose “ambitions had once been babies and a solid husband”—the Dream became overwhelmingly undesirable as “she watched the hulk of marriage drifting down on her frail speed-boat of aspirations” (12). At the time of *Free Air*’s publication, the American Dream included a desire for individual success found inside a conformity. Lewis’s character utilized the visualization that fabricates personal growth by visualizing herself outside of the idealized American Dream so intensely it that it caused her to escape it. Lefebvre and Jackson help the reader connect the desires that drove Claire across the country and those that dreamed up a road system before it existed: the positive power of visualization.

The strict demands of the Dream also generated a negative power since society is constantly changing, causing people to reject its conformity to one idea of success. Thus, the Dream can never accurately serve as an ideal definition of personal success for the entire country’s population. Yet in the early twentieth century the Dream was the *only* acceptable ideal life. Someone like Claire felt compelled to escape the current pressures within the cultural ideal

of the Dream. However, Claire's journey welcomed the idea of meeting people unlike herself, broadening her understanding of the structural flaws of the Dream. Thus, her journey can be considered a successful achievement of personal growth because she understood these concepts of the interwoven social nature of her environment. She discovers the differences of a truer shaped America inside the social spaces she was a stranger to before traveling, allowing her to grow individually with positive influences from a new social environment.

Contrastingly, there exists individuals unlike Claire, who are able to see the structural flaws of the American Dream but lack the ability to let such flaws inspire change instead of devastate hope. A man like Chris McCandless—who left his American Dream-life, including all family, friends, fulfilled college education and possessions, in order to fulfill a self-development journey. In *Into the Wild*, Jon Krakauer tells the story of Chris and goes to great lengths to capture the young man's motivations for such an ambitious and lonely journey. At the time of Chris's disappearance, the American Dream was under extreme criticism. Citizens were rebelling against the conformity of its social idealism. Chris embodied the resistance to conform motivated by a greater desire for freedom. As he donated all his money to charity, didn't keep many possessions and willed to live off the land in a final Alaskan adventure, he pursued a kind of life that he felt accommodated his personal growth into his most authentic self. In a book by Leo Tolstoy found with Chris's personal items, a passage was highlighted: "I wanted movement and not a calm course of existence. I felt in myself a superabundance of energy which found no outlet in our quiet life" (15). Chris desired more than the strict streets leading to nine-to-five jobs and typical households that the Dream generated like an assembly line spitting out robots. One of the first places Chris settled into for a fragment of his journey was in Carthage, South Dakota. Krakauer describes "the community's stasis, its plebian virtues and unassuming mien. The place was a black eddy, a pool of jetsam beyond the pull of the main current, and that suited him just

fine” (18). This town symbolized the counter-culture rebellion that made Chris feel safe that he wouldn’t be choked by the confines of the Dream.

However, McCandless forgot an essential part a successful personal-growth journey. He left out arguably the most important takeaway from Lefebvre and Jackson’s theories.

McCandless repeatedly left every place he found refuge in after a short amount of time, always seeking greater fulfillment. Krakauer lets the people who met Chris breathe the life of his story. Each mention that Chris never accepted help, not even a pair of shoes. McCandless’s self-survival mentality, drenched in toxic masculinity, was bred from his rebellion to conform to the American Dream and ultimately set him up for failure. His journey ended in his death: poisoning mixed with starvation. He was found where he last set up camp, in a deserted Fairbanks bus on The Stampede Trail in Alaska. Without discrediting his emotions towards an unstable ideal and his desire to find tranquility in nature, it’s important to note that McCandless found himself a personal journey lacking an essential element, which he realized too late. In the side margins of another novel, Chris scribbled a line days before his death while unable to move out of the bus: “Happiness only real when shared” (189). His chances for personal growth were halted every time he removed himself from his social spaces. Mark Uffelman’s text, “Forging the Self in the Stream of Experience,” emphasizes the social element of personal growth success and helps one understand Chris’s failed journey. He claims, “self-cultivation centers on the practice of striving toward the unfolding of personal potential in a manner that seeks to harmonize the individual with the surrounding natural and social environment” (322). Thus, there cannot be self-improvement without the desire to also have social harmony. To search for “the good life” requires visualization of one’s society becoming the landscape or environment of said desired life. The American Dream and its strict-natured conformity had led McCandless down a path in

search of self-development, a “good life,” outside of the only one available; and once the social was eliminated, it was one that did not exist.

However, an individual who understands the importance of the social within a personal journey is William Least-Heat Moon, author of *Blue Highways*. Heat Moon seemingly lived inside the American Dream—holding a successful career and a wife—until he lost his job and his marriage ended, uprooting his life. Since the American dream of this time was still being discredited, Americans did not know how to define their country. Heat Moon decided he needed to understand its true definition of his nation and himself. Instead of visiting the robust, big cities that only represented the idealized, unstable Dream, he traveled to the small, back-corner towns of America where he found people who gave the country a more authentic definition than he previously knew. In his acts of listening and writing down the stories of each person he encountered, he was working inside the concepts articulated by Barry Lopez in his publication of *Landscape and Narrative*. Lopez discusses the powers and social nature of storytelling and writes, “the power of narrative rests on two things: the skillful invocation of unimpeachable sources and a listener’s knowledge that no hypocrisy or subterfuge is involved” (69).

Heat Moon utilizes this concept in various ways. His “unimpeachable sources” were the most authentic representations of Americans he could find, and above all he was an active listener. Additionally, his motivators included stories that accompanied him on his travels; works by Whitman and Neihardt, authors embarking on likeminded journeys. He found the desire for a personal growth journey in the dismantling structure of the American Dream. No longer a breadwinner or the strong head of the household, he couldn’t conform to his country’s ideals; they failed him. He searched for new meaning inside the land’s people. Though he was not without distraction. Evidence of Heat Moon learning the importance of the social in personal growth is illustrated in chapter six, during his travels to Nevada as he stares out the window of his van:

“For an instant, I thought the desert looked back. Against the glass a reflection of an opaque face. I couldn’t take my attention from the presence that was mostly absence” (191). In this simple observation Heat Moon admits that while he tried desperately to truly see his landscape (the physical and social aspects of authentic America) it was himself—symbolized by his literal reflection—that was in the way of understanding the country as a whole. He starts to realize man’s main distraction from societal harmony is egotism—“the self-absorption and self-aggrandizement which the quest for self-fulfillment is thought to engender” writes Alan Gerwith, author of *Self-Fulfillment*. Egotism is also the source of the greed that wrongly empowered the individual within the American Dream and caused the fight for social mobility.

Using his understanding of social landscapes, the social nature of personal stories and their power to generate influence, he creates a book which reflects the true definition of America in its time period *after* the idealized American Dream is dismantled and spat on by most. Cal Jillson speaks of how novelists of past centuries “envisioned harmony between the outer plantation of the world and the inner plantation of the human heart and soul. Yet they knew from history and experience that such societies did not exist in nature. They had to be artfully created and carefully sustained against the ravages of time.” (260). Heat Moon, decades later, takes on the same task of artfully weaving together stories that stick to the walls of his readers’ hearts and inspire honesty. He knew of the nation’s differences yet wanted to plant them along the same pages to create a whole picture of interconnected truth. Like McCandless, Heat Moon was motivated to find new meaning for himself. If he could, I imagine he would tell Chris to sit inside his shared social spaces and listen to others with earnest more often.

Interestingly, Heat Moon was influenced by the same honest and social nature of storytelling as self-developmental coaches and speakers who repeatedly tell their clients the importance of sharing personal growth stories. Stories are social and serve as influencers. When connected with

our stories, we become active parts of the synthetic sphere (or landscape) of self-development and we invite others inside of it to motivate us simultaneously. Alan Gerwith, who studied the link between self-fulfillment and society, offers a fine-tuned reasoning behind sharing personal stories with our social spaces:

“The self-fulfilled person does not live in isolation; an important part of his being fulfilled consists in having his friends and other associates with whom he can share mutually accepted values. Persons make the best of themselves in such relationships; their capacities are enhanced by the sharing and affection that their relationships embody.” (195).

Thus, sharing our stories creates an atmosphere of mutual ambition, without the constricting nature embedded in the ideals of the crumbling American Dream.

To juxtapose the Dream’s current shape to self-development, consider the current American Dream as the desire for equality. Gerwith’s discussion of relationships seems to offer possible conversations of growth towards the new Dream. Yet how do we achieve societal and personal growth if, as Cal Jillson points out, “no nation has ever harvested the full potential and creativity of all its citizens[?]” (288). To infuse our nation’s true potential is to share the potential of all its citizens. “Breaking these barriers, releasing these talents, is the great social and moral task of the twenty-first century. The special responsibility of [the] social ... is to work toward a future in which all can find an honorable place” (288).

In order for all to achieve satiable personal growth, the motivation to grow individually *and* harmoniously as a society must be pushed through our social spaces. 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 a simple story: 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



“Sleep on the Floor” The Lumineers. Vevo, 2016. Screenshot

mesmerizing moment, causing a pause and a curiosity; we ask ourselves, ‘*what else is possible?*’

The most truthful lyric in the song—“if we don’t leave this town, we’ll never make it out/ I was not born to drown”—speaks such a high truth, offering a connection to the concept that some social environments are not changing in progressive ways because its inhabitants do not wish to be changed; and thus, the attempt to change individually becomes impossible unless one escapes such an environment. This five-minute video creates a fire, an ability to feel the desires of its characters and witness the struggles, the bravery, and freedom found inside a journey of growth. It motivates the idea of a changing social space, just as *Heat Moon* does by including the story of a small town that never desired change; both quick stories allow us to truly see our nation, to empathize with their characters’ desires and understand the structural dilemmas of their current social landscapes. Both communicate why one may want to leave in search of individual progression and a desire to be surrounded by societal growth.

Moreover, the creators and sharers of these stories are motivated by a desire to have societal improvement, allowing room for personal growth within their creations and the promotion of self-development through story-telling. Due to the state of our American Dream—true equality

across the nation—self-development coaches today all support a similar mantra: *If I wish to change my environment and if I can show up differently to change my social space, I will feel fulfilled and with purpose*. Our environments are only changed by us—how we appear in them and how we treat them. We also cannot do it alone; there’s a need for a tribe, a cheer-squad, a hand to hold and someone to listen. Recall that Lopez claims stories have healing powers if listened to sincerely without judgement. Rebuilding and relying on our social spaces instead of dividing them is today’s Dream and thus the motivation behind all self-help coaches, authors, and speakers. We are currently in a state of confliction; some are afraid of movement and reject change. They have not realized the importance of moving *together* while traveling solo.

The embodiment of our current cultural dilemma is illuminated by Heat Moon in the form of a few callous, true words from a woman from in Maryland: “Having the gumption to live different *and* the sense to let everybody else live different. That’s the hardest thing, hands down” (397). Creating a more accepting social landscape is difficult. The Dream for each human to find an honorable place in our nation without subjection to any categorized discrimination needs to co-exist with the desire for the growth and the development of a better shared life. 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. Cal Jillson also wrote, “Benjamin Franklin ... described America as a place in which a human flowering was about to occur” (288). A truly authentic self-developmental journey embraces not only the growth of one, but also nods to Franklin’s description of collective human possibility

within our home; thus is the description of the *true* American Dream, offering the fiery motivation to flourish.

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