Cultural Daily

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Differing Versions of the American Dream

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, October 4th, 2017

It's time to discuss the American dream. Why? Because the American dream is a paradox and we're coming up against it. When you come up against a paradox, you can't go any further. It's like you're in a dark room and there's a black hole in the middle. To see the black hole, you have to turn the lights on, but by its very nature the black hole consumes light. So how do you know it's there? You just do. No matter how hard you try, you'll never be able to see it and grasp it.

As an American you might celebrate the fact that you are able to profess whichever faith you choose. Freedom of religion is one of the tenets of the Constitution. The First Amendment guarantees you can practice religion without Congress restricting your practice. It also guarantees your right to expression, so you might celebrate the fact that you're free to express your views through art, or simply through blunt speech. You can also express your dissenting views when it comes to the actions of the government and law enforcement.

Before the First Amendment's provisions, there is the Declaration of Independence, in which Thomas Jefferson wrote that the "Creator" gives us "certain unalienable rights": "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Here, freedom is a basic right and all men are equal. Yet the Smithsonian's Henry Wiencek writes,

"The very existence of slavery in the era of the American Revolution presents a paradox, and we have largely been content to leave it at that, since a paradox can offer a comforting state of moral suspended animation."

Jefferson was the embodiment of that paradox. He was an early abolitionist who basically advocated for freeing the slaves in the Declaration, then went quiet about it and ended his days a slaveowner. All men were created equal, unless they were slaves, in which case they weren't created equal.

Jefferson was pursuing "happiness," using slaves to make life at Monticello convenient and enjoyable—giving himself more free time to govern and write. His version of the American dream ended up including slaves as a supporting cast. For others, such as George Washington, who emancipated his slaves, the American dream guaranteed freedom for all men, including slaves. The burgeoning country was founded on this paradox in which ideals came up against convenience.

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Freedom, Trucks, and the American Dream

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If you were to run around asking people, “What is the American dream,” the majority of answers would include the word “freedom.” There are a lot interesting ways freedom presents a paradox in America.

For example, we wanted the freedom to conduct commerce across a huge expanse of land —more than 3.8 million acres. So we built railroads, but trains couldn’t go everywhere. Then in 1925 Henry Ford invented the Model T Pickup truck expressly for farmers. People soon realized trucks could aid in nationwide commerce, so we crafted the infrastructure to accommodate them.

Since then, trucks have become an American pastime: the top three selling vehicles in 2016 were trucks, and the Ford F-series has been the number one selling vehicle for the last 35 years. People who live in cities and barely ever need four-wheel drive still own trucks, because trucks give you the freedom to pick up and move your things whenever you want to. They also give you the freedom to drive on and off road.

But once we opened up the country to unlimited commerce, we became slaves to commerce. The assembly lines that allowed all that commerce reduced men to the level of machines. We became addicted to fossil fuels and spent the next 92 years spouting carbon dioxide into the air. This helped lead to the sixth mass extinction of animals. The world has lost half of its wildlife in the last 40 years. While we’re free to motor around in trucks on and off road (but you still have to answer to the gas tank), all those dead animals aren’t free to do anything. At least now we’re free to work on solving the problem.

Freedom, Football, and the American Dream

Jazz singer Dianna Reeves sings the U.S. National Anthem as the RAF Molesworth, United Kingdom color guard presents the U.S. flag during the NFL game at Wembly Stadium in London, England Oct. 26, 2014. Every year, London hosts three games as part of the NFL International Series. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Ashley Hawkins/Released)

Like trucks, American football is a distinctly American pastime. The present situation with football finds us facing the paradox of America head-on, as if we’re diving head-first into pile-up.

In terms of millennials and the NFL, 61 percent think it’s a “sleazy organization,” and 67 percent don’t trust NFL players. Yet, the majority of the NFL’s players are millennials. That’s just an intro to the paradox. This is an organization rife with issues that reflect the state of America. These issues include chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), which is a brain disease caused by concussions and repeated head trauma, as well as players’ abuse of women. Should this game exist when, in its current state, play can easily lead to brain disease?

The NFL is a complex organization whose members are showing dissent against racism by taking a knee during the national anthem.

Trump believes owners shouldn’t allow players to kneel during the national anthem. In case you haven’t been following, a quick recap as to how we got here:

- Colin Kaepernick, former quarterback of the 49ers, began kneeling during the anthem to protest police killings of black people.
- Ameer Loggins, a friend of Kaepernick's, reminds us of his words: "[I'm] not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color."
- Kaepernick's protest is big, and it goes back to the founding of the nation, a nation built on the backs of black slaves.

Now, other players are kneeling and locking arms, partly in protest of Trump, primarily in solidarity with Kaepernick and the cause of equality. Kaepernick opened a floodgate. Trump, the flag, racism—all are tied up in the very pertinent question as to the legitimacy of this country's actions in comparison with its ideals of freedom and equality for all.

At a rally in Alabama, Trump said owners should fire players who protest. When they kneel, Trump said owners should respond by saying, "Get that son of a bitch off the field right now, he's fired. He's fired!" Trump feels players who kneel are disrespecting the flag and the country. He also said, in a press conference with the Spanish Prime Minister:

"To me, the NFL situation is a very important situation[…] All I do is work. And to be honest with you, that's an important function of working. It's called respect for our country. Many people have died—many, many people."

His argument is that people have died so we can be free, and part of that freedom is wrapped up in the work we do. The NFL players are working in a system of commerce that allows them to make millions of dollars. Why should they be able to protest during the national anthem when the nation, and those who have sacrificed themselves for our freedom, are what enable to them to make money from the system?

These are two differing versions of the American dream. As Americans who are allowed to work and reap benefits from the economy, should we be able to protest the national anthem? The First Amendment says yes. Trump says no. Observers have pointed out that employees have to follow employers' rules about what they can and can't do on the job. But if an employer makes a rule about protest, should it override free speech rights? Should an employer be able to fire someone because of his or her beliefs, his or her exercise of the First Amendment?

Employers can, and do fire people for all sorts of things. But does standing for the national anthem have anything to do with the job of playing football in an American economy that supports that job? The version of the American dream you believe in will determine your answer to that question.

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