

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN DREAM

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Professional Club, Dec. 8, 1988

I

America became a nation because many people living in other lands had dreams of what life more ideally might be like, dreams so vivid and powerful as to drive them to pull up stakes, risk the uncertainties of moving to a strange land^{and} leave the accustomed patterns of life in the hope of bringing their dreams closer to fulfillment. The dreams of those early settlers and of the countless stream of immigrants who followed, and of those born on this soil - up to this very day - have not all been identical; in fact some may have been at cross purposes with others. But taken together they have played a major role in determining the shape of the government and the society which we call "American", and they give a real clue to the particular qualities and defects that form the national character of Americans.

It is little wonder then that over the whole two hundred twelve years of America's existence as a nation, countless observers and examiners have engaged in the exercise of defining and seeking to put into a neat descriptive package "The American Dream."

This exercise, however, poses problems. There is the problem of finding valid evidence. Is the interview approach adequate? After all some deeply held dreams that move us to action we do not readily and verbally admit to having, ~~Conversely~~ is the overt behavior of the American people the infallible clue to the American dreams harbored inside? Much of my own behavior, I must admit, gives^{no} obvious clue to the dreams I cherish most. Another problem: how big a sampling is necessary to form reasonably sound generalizations? How broad a time-span is the generalization to cover? Are the dreams of Americans in 1776, or even of 1926 the same in overall pattern as those of 1988?

In spite of all these problems or obstacles, Americans and non-Americans alike continue to engage in this game. On _____, Hope College will dismiss all classes and seek to bring the total college community, and as many of the Holland community as it can encourage, together to participate in a day-long ~~two~~^{one}-meeting discussion on the topic - you guessed it - "The American Dream Revisited."

Is this a worthwhile exercise? I would submit that when Americans

thoughtfully and honestly set out to examine their own dreams (which give clues to what they really value), study the consequences flowing from acting on these dreams, and thus reassess their true worth and the priorities they give to one or two of the aspects of their several dreams, the results can be educative in the Dewey-an sense, that is bring about changed behavior.

I have long been fascinated by this topic of "The American Dream, primarily I guess because I have spent so much of my life reading and studying American Literature and with it American history and society. And one of the themes in so much of American Letters has to do with Americans' dreams. So, tonight, in order to whet your interest and to encourage you to participate in the Hope College Critical Issues forum next spring, I will venture on "Some Reflections on the American Dream."

It is a vast and complex topic. I will focus on two broad kinds of dreams: first those that Americans have had and perhaps continue to have about their country and society - their dreams about the ideal America. Secondly, and more importantly, I will examine those dreams that Americans have had for themselves as individuals - dreams about what they want to do, to become, to possess, in order to feel fulfilled, or happy.

II

First, what have been and are some of the most frequently expressed elements of Americans' dreams about the ideal American society or nation?

Dream 1. Let this be a country where freedom is paramount, where individual liberty is jealously guarded and protected by law, where each citizen is free to speak his mind, to meet together and go where he pleases, to worship according to his conscience, to own property and to use it or dispose of it as he wishes, and to pursue his own goals, his own vision of happiness. The only limitation to this freedom is the provision, "so long as he does not hinder others in ^{enjoying} having the same ^{freedoms} rights.

Dream 2. Let this be a country where equality is treasured, not equality of possessions, but equality before the law and a rough basic equality of opportunity so that one has a reasonable chance of succeeding in carrying out his personal dreams on the basis of his abilities and performance, rather than on the basis of his skin color, or parentage, or nationality background, or religious affiliation.

Dream 3. Let this be a country whose people (acting individually or through their government) have a sense of mission: to help promote freedom and human rights and a decent standard of living around the world, a people warm and generous in their response to human suffering everywhere.

Dream 4. Let this be a country where there is adequate opportunity for every citizen to live decently and with a degree of dignity and comfort, if he is willing to work hard.

Dream 5. Let this be the strongest, most powerful, the wealthiest country in the world, having the highest standard of living.

Dream 6. (I add this dream not because it is so commonly expressed, verbally, but because I think it is a dream secretly harbored and often carried over into behavior by a significant number of Americans). Let this be a country always led by white persons of European descent, Protestants or possibly Catholics.

There may be other dreams for the nation widely held, but let these suffice as adequate to make several points - most of them fairly obvious. First, not all these six dreams are complementary, each supporting the other five. The first three come closest to being a harmonious triad. They address humane ideals that embrace all humanity. But even these three pose problems when held simultaneously. When any one ^{of them} becomes the overpowering final dream, before which all others must give preference when it comes to actual situations, they cause dilemmas. An overriding focus on the dream of individual freedom, especially though not exclusively when applied to the marketplace, may well lead to conditions antithetical to the dream of equal opportunity. Witness the intensity and heat of the debate over limiting individual economic freedom through anti-trust laws, and passage of the income-tax amendment to the constitution. An examination of the utterances of Ronald Reagan and Jesse Jackson points to the conclusion that for one the dream of personal liberty looms more important and for the other the dream of equality of opportunity takes priority. Did the same distinctions apply to our two major presidential candidates in 1988, or was it impossible to discern because of the obscuring mud showers?

Or again, holding up the dream of becoming the wealthiest, most powerful country in the world or of maintaining that position may not sound so bad when set by itself, but if it ~~is to become~~ the dominant, obsessive dream, it may make impossible actions to promote the dream of promoting equality of opportunity, world wide, or of being warm and generous to suffering elsewhere in the world. Which of these two dreams should have

priority? The problem with dreams as motivators, when we have several, is that in the real world we are constantly forced to make choices. As has been ruefully pointed out, often the price of the best is all the rest. Or, as Henry James was fond of illustrating in his fiction, one of the great human dilemmas is that a person is often forced to give up something precious in order to obtain something priceless. The rub comes in deciding which is which. And the tragedy comes when we mistakenly decide what is priceless, only to discover, too late, that it was merely precious.

Are all of Americas' dreams for America equally priceless? Are some of them actually desirable or good? I would submit that of the list of six dreams cited, the last three mentioned, in increasing degrees, are dangerous and unworthy of being given top priority among our dreams. It is easiest to see the dangers in following the last dream - the WASP dream. Happily we have governmental safeguards that blunt this dream - even in the face of associations that have espoused it - the KKK, the Bund. But the greater danger inheres in holding highest the more commonly held American dream of being the richest, most powerful nation. This is not only the next extension of the WASP dream, but a much more deadly extension when carried out as the ultimate dream-driver. A longing to return to its position as the strongest, wealthiest nation state in Europe, and perhaps beyond, was the seductive dream that Hitler held out to the German people. It is the dream that fed the actions of the English and the French and the Italians and the Romans and the Greeks under Alexander in their thrust for colonies all over the world, even though they sought to rationalize their actions as designed to fulfill "the white man's burden" of bringing civilization to the benighted savages. And the results? Was Carl Sandburg including the U.S.A. in his thinking as he penned these words?

It has happened before.
 Strong men put up a city and got
 a nation together,
 And paid singers to sing and women to
 warble: we are the greatest city
 the greatest nation,
 nothing like us ever was.

And while the singers sang
 and the strong men listened
 and paid the singers well
 and felt good about it all,
 there were rats and lizards who listened
 ... and the only listeners left now
 ... are ... the rats ... and the lizards.

And there are black crows
crying, "Caw, caw,"
bringing mud and sticks
building a nest
 over the words carved
 on the doors where the panels are cedar
 and the strips on the panels are gold
 and golden girls came singing:
 "We are the greatest city,
 the greatest nation:
 Nothing like us ever was."

And the only singers now are crows crying, "Caw, caw,"
And the sheets of rain whine in the wind and doorways.
And the only listeners now are ... the rats ... and the lizards.

(from "Four Preludes on Playthings of the Wind.

III

If I were to ask the average American to talk about his dreams - the ones that he dwells on most, toward which he points his actions, the vast majority, I am sure, would not describe their dreams for a better, more ideal country, but rather toward those visions about his own future, his dreams of self-fulfillment.

It is true that for many Americans the central personal dream or one of his highly held dreams is to participate in bringing his country or the whole world a bit closer to what he envisions. Studs Terkel, well known author and oral historian, fascinated by the idea of the American Dream, travelled all over the U. S. A. interviewing Americans from all walks and segments of society, rich and poor, day laborers and professionals, blacks and whites, recent immigrants and bluebloods of Mayflower stock - getting them to talk about their dreams. In 1982 he published his findings, American Dreams Lost and Found, a book made up of a careful sampling, one hundred vignettes of representative Americans relating their individual dreams. Again this year, just off the press comes a companion volume, The Great Divide: Second Thoughts on the American Dream. Some of the dreams are encouragingly humane and other-centered. For example:

- the fifty-year old lady who led the fight against the local government to save her old neighborhood in Chicago in order to preserve a sense of community in an increasingly barren big city;
- the university professor whose deepest satisfactions came from working with his hands, absorbing the beauties of nature, and passing on these same values to his children;
- the country girl who came to the big city and worked in the stockyards, butchering pigs and cattle and who got involved

in the labor protest against the terrible working conditions and joined the union movement, and who, at the age of 70 could still say, "One has to be involved in things outside themselves if they want to grow;"

- the supermarket owner for whom the big dream was "to really make things work."

But what comes through in Terkel's two books is the great preponderance of dreams focusing upon the making of money - large sums of money. Said one business man when he was interviewed about the American Dream, "The American Dream is to be better off than you are. How much is enough money? Enough money ~~money~~ is always a little more than you have." The economic dream - to achieve a better livelihood, - is no unworthy dream, especially for those who have been barely subsisting, who have been living in a class society in the lowest class, out of which it was almost impossible to break, living too in a land with sparse natural resources, overpopulated. For how many foreigners has the vast land of America with its seemingly limitless resources and its encouragement of personal freedom had a great appeal, and still does. The biggest pressure for migration to the U. S., ~~true as ever~~ today, has been from people of countries in which the great majority have been suffering from privation and subjugation. A good example is the problem of our southern border. Said a former director of the U. S. Immigration service about Mexicans seeking entrance: (1978)

At least one-fourth of a million apprehensions were made last year. If apprehended at the border, we turn them around and ask them to depart. They turn around and go back to Mexico. A few hours later they try again. In El Paso we deported one fellow six times in one day. ... We've deported some people more than one hundred times. They always want to come back. There's a job and there's desperation.

The economic dream in the form of getting past the level of bare survival is understandably the foremost dream of those who are living on the edge. But once that stage is past, what then? Carl Sandburg optimistically intones:

Once having marched
Over the margins of animal necessity
Over the grim line of sheer subsistence,
Then man came
To the deeper ritual of his bones,
To the time for thinking things over,
To the dance, the song, the story
Or the hours given over to dreaming,
Once having so marched.

(from The People, Yes)

But what if that economic dream remains the driving dream, insatiable, dominant, suppressing the deeper rituals?

It is discomfiting to note how many foreign observers of the American scene and the American Dream conclude that the Dream of Wealth, material possessions is the peculiarly central American Dream. Sometimes they comment on this with a tinge of envy - sometimes with a tinge of scorn. I have always resented the latter, for in my observation of peoples living in quite a few other countries in which I have lived for a time, the material dream has always seemed to me to be equally strong. But this does not necessarily negate the possible accuracy of the analysis.

When one turns to the analysis of American observers - persons concerned about their own fellow Americans and about the quality of their dreams and the consequence of the actions taken in following these dreams, it is difficult to miss the organ-peal of lament, or anger, or disappointment coming from the mouths and pens of that tribe of sensitive observers - the religious leaders, the social historians and the literary writers, focusing so much on what they consider the over-stress of Americans on the dream of fortune, the pot of gold - a dream that has become an exclusive obsession. Their chorus takes many forms. Listen to the serious American writers:

In the mid nineteenth century, one Henry David Thoreau turned his back on the accumulation of possessions, retreated to Waldon Pond and carried out his experiment in simple living for two years plus. He figured out his expenses for the first eight months - totaling \$61.99⁷/₄, had a glorious amount of time to devote to studying nature and the wisdom of the past found in books, fulfilled in part his civic duties by opposing slavery, and lectured his fellow Americans, pointing out that a man is wealthy in proportion to the number of things he can do without. He had a neighbor and friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson who was equally critical of the "low dream" - "Things are in the saddle and ride mankind" - and who joined Henry in calling upon his countrymen to look higher, and more deeply within themselves to find more noble dreams.

A bit later Mark Twain, himself imbued from childhood with dreams of great wealth in that era of tremendous expansion and speculation now called "The Gilded Age" after a novel Twain himself wrote, came to realize from keen observation and from bitter experience how destructive this dream could be - on the dreamer and on those around him. Increasingly his writings became Jeremiads, moral fables. Said he about one of the

financial barons of his day:

Jay Gould was the mightiest disaster which has ever befallen this country. The people desired money before his day, but he taught them to fall down and worship it. The gospel of Jay Gould is, "Get money. Get it quickly. Get it in abundance. Get it dishonestly if you can, honestly if you must."

Around the same time William Dean Howells reached the same conclusion and wrote several cautionary novels, describing the impact of the ruthless drive for financial success under the "Gospel of Wealth", both on the dreamer and those around him.

In the twentieth century, such criticism became even more common, especially in the depression years, the 1930's, when the dreams of so many were reduced to the daily struggle for bare survival, and when more and more people were beginning to question the "system" and those who promoted it and dominated it. Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, Carl Sandburg, Clifford Odets, Elmer Rice, Arthur Miller - all flirted for awhile with the socialist antidote, but most of them retreated from this remedy and turned to their pens to try to shake American individuals out of their obsession with wealth and the status that so often accompanied it. The big industrialist, the financier, the tycoon ^{were} ~~was~~ favorite objects of their concern.

F. Scott Fitzgerald was a case in point. He was fascinated by people of wealth, perhaps in part because he, like Twain, dreamt of fame and fortune - and of winning his beautiful Zelda, who in turn wanted to lead the life of the fast set, daring, carousing, spendthrift. So he wasted a good deal of his considerable talent grinding out slick stories for slick magazines that would please popular taste and bring in much money. Meanwhile he bewailed what he recognized as the betrayal of his artistic integrity. His best works are poignant morality tales, nearly all tragic accounts of the very rich: "The Rich Boy," The Last Tycoon, and his masterpiece, The Great Gatsby. His strongest criticism in that novel is directed not at Gatsby, the self-made, gangster millionaire, but at the couple Tom and Daisy, both born into wealth, members of the smart, leisure set. Says the narrator, who is the mouthpiece of the author, in the story:

They were careless people, Tom and Daisy. They smashed up things and people, and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, ... and let other people clean up the mess they made.

Around the same ^{time} Sinclair Lewis began depicting, with his acidulous

pen, the emptiness, stupidity and banality of middle class men and women who made social climbing ~~their goal~~, via the get-rich quick approach their central dream. A favorite Lewis target seemed to be the small-town Maine Street business man, like George Babbitt, whose behavior (narrowly provincial, bragging, America-firster, imitative in taste, bewitched by all the gadgetry what marked the man of distinction) was so indicative of the money-possession driven dreamer that his name now has become a common noun in our dictionaries, the label for just this kind of person. But Lewis did not limit his satire ~~to~~ ^{to} business men. All of the professions - doctors, lawyers, teachers, social workers were singled out for their worship of the same Gods.

In the theatre, American dramatists have struck the same theme: to mention just a few, Eugene O'Neill (Marco Millions for example), Arthur Miller in All My Sons and Death of a Salesman, and Edward Albee, especially in that devastatingly wicked short play which he entitled ironically The American Dream, in which using expressionistic devices of exaggeration and symbolism, he underscores the ~~devastating~~ ^{debasing} effect of self-centered hedonism and materialistic drives on the keystone of American society - the family. (I am trying to get the theatre department to put on this play as part of the March Symposium. If so, go to see it. You may be outraged, call it a travesty on the American Dream, but I guarantee that you will come away from the show thinking)

Then in the mid sixties there emerged a little band of bearded, weirdly dressed, long haired poets - Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg et al - reciting their irregular prose-poems filled with four-letter words and hooting derisively ~~against~~ ^{at} nearly all the patterns and norms of American society. For ~~while~~ ^{by} they became cult-heroes for many young Americans. They too were the mouthpiece of another type of protest against the material-success syndrome of the American Dream. The hippie movement, extreme as it was in its counter swing, casting off all sexual restraints, reaching for euphoria through drugs, spurning the great Dutch virtue of cleanliness, narrow as their efforts of establishing a more brotherly community which was usually limited to the tiny commune and survived often by scrounging from the working public, nevertheless had its positive side- urging a return to a simpler life style, closer to nature, less concerned with acquiring the second car, the boat, the jacouzy, the vacation cottage as the epitome of the good life.

Or examine the growing body of fine writing by black Americans - Baldwin, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker et al. They too

write about their American Dreams, dreams so often thwarted by the dominant society into which they have been born. ^{They all were} ~~the~~ protestors against the special obstacles in the path of these Americans because of the color of their skin as they seek to bring to fruition their dreams. For them, too often, it had to be a dream deferred - a theme that the most versatile black author of this century, Langston Hughes, was fond of talking about:

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore -
And then run ?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust ~~and~~ sugar over -
Like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

Black Lorraine Hansberry, playwright, demonstrated all these responses in her poignant play about a black American family, appropriately titled A Raisin in the Sun.

Not all American writers were protestors, lamenting the ~~baser~~ ^{smaller} elements of the American Dream. There was a band, albeit ~~stronger~~, whose interest and concern took the form of affirmation, the cheerleaders, the exhorters trying to rouse their fellow Americans to catch hold of their best dreams and make them realities. To this group belong Walt Whitman, Willa Cather, Carl Sandburg, Thornton Wilder, Archibald MacLeish; ~~and~~ and even those at times turned protester. However, anyone reading widely the ^{writings} ~~writings~~ of the serious writers of America, from 1800 to 1970 can hardly escape the conclusion that, from their ^{perception} ~~perception~~, dreams of self-gratification, ~~centrally~~ the dream of making a fortune, and also attendant narcissistic dreams - of status, fame, sexual conquest, idle leisure - these form the dominant components of the American Dream.

Were they right in their appraisal? The American monitors of the American Dream that I have cited with the exception of Studs Terkel were primarily of an earlier generation (1800-1970). What about 1988? What about the nature and quality of the dreams of the American people today? Are they the same? Are they baser or nobler? What evidence do we as observers and monitors find as we look about us and within ourselves. I would like to throw this out as the key question for our

minutes of discussion. As a way of priming the pump, let me conclude with a few of my own observations.

First some comforting signs that I see hinting at American dreams.

Item 1. The increasing number of Hope College students ^{w/20} ~~that~~ are opting to prepare themselves to become teachers of exceptional children - the handicapped, the emotionally impaired. That suggests to me a high quality dream.

Item 2. The significant response throughout America to the Rotary Polio Plus drive. Service above Self may be more than an idle statement; may enter significantly into the dreams of many Americans.

Item 3. The direction being taken by the leaders in more and more American businesses and industries to promote the welfare of their employees, not only by increasing wages but by involving all in setting goals and taking responsibility for carrying them out - demonstrating a concern for the human psyche as well the the physical needs.

On the other hand, let me point to some disturbing (to me) signs hinting at the dominant American Dream.

Item 1. The press statement of James Kilpatrick, ardent Republican commentator, analyzing the results of the recent presidential elections, not with disapproval but with evident satisfaction: "Bush won the election because America checked its pocketbook." (If that is true, it suggests something about the quality of Americans' dreams for their ideal country, and the dominating dream that motivates Americans' political decisions.)

Item 2. Do you recall a recent TV commercial that begins: "We do not live in a land of Kings and queens. We are a democratic nation. But ... you too can live like a king." Then follows the pitch. Plunk down your dollar or ten for tickets to the Michigan lottery and win two million. Whereupon there appears on the TV screen a bald-headed, uncouth guy, wearing a velvet smoking jacket, smugly surveying his baronial hall. The chilling aspect of this ad and of the tremendous popularity of Wheel of Fortune and its sister shows ad infinitum, ad nauseum, and of Bingo, and the state lotteries, and of the almost daily letters we all receive promising six and a half million dollars to you as winner of the sweepstakes, is that ^{rs,} ~~that~~ There was a time when, in America, the dream of making a fortune was defended by the rationale that reaching that goal would be the reward of hard work, in the process of which some service was rendered or some useful article was made

Private gain leads to public good.

that would contribute to the welfare of others. Now the unabashed pitch is to pander^{to} the American Dream of getting something for nothing - without any work, without any service rendered or goods provided, in fact made possible from money earned by others. "Luck Be my Lady Tonight", from the gangster musical may be replacing the "Stars Spangled Banner" as our national anthem.

Item 3. Consider the posters hanging on the bedroom walls of countless American teenagers in America today - featuring their idols, their heroes, their dreams of what they want to become. Who are they: Michael Jackson, the Boz, Madonna, the Living Dead, the Fridge~~en~~ maybe still Elvis. And those same bedroom walls quiver with the incessant, pounding, hard rock beat (one thousand decibels), accompanied often with inane lyrics, often slightly veiled pornography. (Yes, I have two teenage grandsons.)

Item 4. Hear the comments of one Sean Kelly, 27, college English teacher interviewed by Terkel in his newest volume. He is talking about his first experience teaching Freshman Composition:

I was 24 at the time, just a few years older than my students. They would call me Professor Kelly.

Their first assignment was an essay: to compare small-town and big-city life.

All their examples were from television. When they were talking about small towns, they're talking about 'The Waltons.' When they talked of the big city, almost all of them quoted from 'Miami Vice.' What they want in life is something from 'Dynasty' or 'Dallas': to be rich and good-looking. Their values come from TV commercials. ...

Most of them are in business administration or engineering. They are very conscious about how much money they're going to make and what they're going to own. They can't understand somebody who would like teaching.

It's not just the ignorance that's disturbing. It's the accepting of ignorance. It's acceptable not to know about serious things. People who are really interested are bores to them, the kind you turn off, away from at parties. ... If the important thing is to have a nice car and be well-dressed, who wants to listen to somebody talk about Central America. ...

They're not ashamed to come in late to class. About 10 students would walk in regularly 15 minutes late. I'd say, "Hey, what's going on here?" They said, "We had to wait till 'All My Children' was over. They looked at me as though I were rude for asking."

I had a conference with a girl who couldn't write a sentence. She was leaving as another student came in. She said, "I hope you know I'm missing 'Days of Our Lives.'" She was serious. She had made this sacrifice for this conference.

Is this a caricature of the American collegian? Does the critique have any merit?
validity?

financial ability to do more things with their lives."
— The Editors

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to know about...

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your money to work

TAKING

your body seriously

SPENDING

your time your way

SAVING

for that rainy day

MAKING

that faraway getaway

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STUDS TERKEL



THE GREAT DIVIDE

Part 1

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Studs Terkel, whose bestsellers have examined World War II, the Great Depression and working lives of ordinary citizens, turns attention to the American Dream in his latest book, an oral history: "The Great Divide: Second Thoughts on the American Dream." For five days beginning today, Flair will print excerpts from the book.

Second thoughts on the big dream

By Studs Terkel

Sean Kelly

He's 27.

He comes from a middle-class suburban family "somewhere between conservative and liberal, but they voted for Reagan. I'm a lot more liberal than they are, but I think a lot of liberals are pretty silly also."

At Bowling Green University in Ohio, he was a teaching assistant: three composition courses.

I was 24 at the time, just a few years older than my students. They would call me Professor Kelly.

Their first assignment was an essay: to compare small-town and big-city life.

All their examples were from television. When they're talking about small towns, they're talking about "The Waltons." When they talked of the big city, almost all of

them quoted from "Miami Vice." What they want in life is something from "Dynasty" or "Dallas": to be rich and good-looking. Their values come from TV commercials.

There's a six-, seven-year difference between us, yet when I mention the Rolling Stones, I could be talking about Tommy Dorsey. The gap is enormous.

Most of them are in business administration or engineering. They're very conscious about how much money they're going to make and what they're going to own. They can't understand somebody who would like teaching.

The disturbing thing...

It's not just the ignorance that's disturbing. It's the acceptance of ignorance. It's acceptable not to know about serious things. People who are really interested are bores to them, the kind you turn off, away from at parties. I think it's been fostered by the media: It's OK to be ignorant.

If the important thing is to have a nice car and be well-dressed, who wants to listen to somebody talk about Central America?

A colleague of mine was urging his students: "You have to think about things, to care."

One of the students came out, kind of sore: "Why should we have to think? After all, everything's laid out for you to be successful."

They're not ashamed to come in late to class. About 10 students would walk in regularly 15 minutes late. I'd say, "Hey, what's goin' on?" They said, "We had to wait till 'All My Children' was over." They looked at me as though I were rude for asking.

I had a conference with a girl who couldn't write a sentence. She was leaving as another student came in. She said, "I hope you know I'm missing 'Days of Our Lives.'" She was serious. She had made this sacrifice for this conference.

This other guy said, "Yeah, I know. 'All My Children' is starting now and I'm gonna miss the first 20 minutes of it." There was no irony, they weren't joking.

I've overheard conversations in school cafeterias: "Oh, my God, you know what happened to Ryan yesterday? He was caught in bed with Melissa." And I'll be thinking they're talking about real people.

Item 5. I saved this for last. It is the most uncomfortable, because it hits closest home, aimed at me, a member of the Golden Agers, the AARP Generation, the new leisure class with its own political clout, bent on maintaining all its Social Security benefits, no matter what.

Through the mail the other day I received this pitch:

(Read sections)

Now isn't that the perfect pitch aimed at what its writer considers to be the dominant American dreams of American oldsters: Along with family, travel, money, and health. Self centered to the core, except for the concern about family. And what is this concern? Hooray, "more weekends without ^{having to row} the kids ^{along}, Hooray, the kids have flown the coop. And one of the helpful articles in a forthcoming issue is on "How to cope when a child gets a divorce. Yes indeed, this magazine will help you to celebrate that you are successfully beyond the "sandwiched generation - caught between raising kids and caring for aged parents."

Is this the extent and general level of the American dream of that growing segment of the American populace- the older generation? Are these the dominant dreams that shape ^{their} ~~his~~ life in the years when they have supposedly achieved the greatest wisdom? Is this my dream? I hope not And yet, did I not breathe some huge sighs of relief when I no longer had to help put our younger son through medical school, and even internship? Do I not spend inordinate amounts of time perusing travel magazines and planning trips that have as their sole goal my own (and my wife's) pleasure? Do I not spend much more time now figuring out how to augment my income, not by work, but by cagy buying and selling of equities than I ever did when I was engrossed in work activities that were much more worthwhile both for me and for others?

On this disquieting note I close, soliciting now your observations and judgments on the state of the American Dream today. And if our conclusions are at all unsettling, what can be done to increase the brightness and intensity of our best dreams, dim the seductiveness of our lesser dreams so that they recede to their proper subordinate place in our dream galaxy, and blow out the ones that should be discarded completely. The floor is, finally, yours.

THE WORKING POOR

wick aren't saints—any more than less civic-minded workers in urban areas are sinners. In Barwick, it's easier to be generous than in the South Bronx because many neighbors are family and longtime friends. There isn't much crime. And keeping up financially with the Joneses is simpler because there are no nearby well-to-do neighborhoods. Stidham's attitude is typical. "I'd rather live here on bread and water," he says, "than eat steak in the city every day."

Hemmed-in horizons

In a sense, the views of rural workers such as Stidham are similar to those of

ing to starve to death, it will be here. Living in Mexico would be like living in hell."

However committed undocumented workers and the rural poor are to their current jobs, poverty shouldn't be construed as a romantic adventure for either group. Maria lives in fear of being separated from her daughter. And as Jane Bagby of the Appalachian Center at the University of Kentucky points out: "Folks think the rural poor are all happy, sitting around playing dulcimers and making quilts. That's far too simple." One of the most frustrating problems is that youngsters find their prospects are often limited. In Kentucky, for

better-paying positions such as health-service workers and paralegals. Much of the concern over a McJobs economy stems from a controversial 1986 report to the Joint Economic Committee by liberal economists Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, in which they warned that the growth of the service sector in recent years has been heavily concentrated in low-wage service jobs, with almost 60 percent of all new jobs created from 1979 to 1984 paying less than \$7,000 a year.

Other economists, however, flatly dispute their analysis. Most service jobs, say critics of the Bluestone-Harrison thesis, haven't been disproportionately

low-wage. For instance, a recent study by Marvin Kusters and Murray Ross of the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank, concludes that Bluestone and Harrison's numbers result from little more than questionable statistical assumptions. At best, the competing camps of economists agree on only one salient fact: Today's workers are not experiencing the upward mobility evident in previous decades. "The big conclusion," says Janet Norwood of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, "is that there has been little change over a 20-year period. And that runs contrary to the philosophy we have in this country that everything gets better."

In the short term, their prospects may brighten. The 1986 tax overhaul essentially

eliminated the working poor from the federal tax rolls, providing up to \$5 billion in tax relief for the poor and near poor. Thirteen states have since absolved many working-poor families from paying state income tax. Finally, most working-poor, unlike a hard-core group of inner-city welfare mothers, don't remain mired in poverty for a decade or more at a time. Thus, the bulk of Americans who plug away at a job year after year still get ahead. But the working poor are also at the mercy of larger economic trends, and the forecasters have already cut their estimates of growth for 1988. That could more than offset any recent gains—and actually increase the number of people who, even in the best of times, manage to survive only at the margins. ■



"We're not rich people, but we're better off than some": The Fryes' \$7,600 for a family of 11

another large segment of the working poor: Illegal aliens. Workers from both groups, unlike the displaced new poor, don't generally consider low-wage jobs a humiliating put-down. For the 2 million to 4 million illegals in the U.S., low-wage jobs here such as migrant work and busing dishes pay more than well-paid jobs in their homelands. In Mexico, for example, as much as half the labor force is out of work or underemployed, and a minimum-wage worker brings home only \$1,000 a year. Maria, who sells cosmetics door to door in Los Angeles to support her three children and who asked that her last name be withheld, typifies the illegals' acceptance—and even pride—in their status. Despite losing her husband here in a car accident and her \$8,000 life savings to a purse snatcher, she prefers to remain in the U.S. "I'm economically poor, but I'm not poor in any other way," she says in Spanish. "If I'm go-

instance, an estimated 400,000 adults are functionally illiterate. Teen-pregnancy rates in the Appalachian region of the state match those in some of Chicago's toughest inner-city neighborhoods. And like the undernourished youth of Appalachia, the rural working poor all too often grow up intellectually stunted, their horizons narrowed.

A "McJobs" explosion?

What does the future hold for the working poor? That depends to a great extent on whether the "McJobs" thesis is true or not. According to that scenario, a birth dearth will tighten the labor market during the next two decades, and that could give impoverished workers a big leg up in the ever expanding service sector of the economy. The hitch is that low-wage workers may lack the qualifications to move out of poorly paid service jobs—like hamburger flipping at McDonald's—into

by David Whitman with Jeannye Thornton, Joseph P. Shapiro and Gordon Witkin, and Steve L. Hawkins in Los Angeles