

May 7, 2000

## **Identity; American Dreaming**

By Richard Powers for The New York Times

Correction Appended

Of all our national traits, I find it the most singular, the most astonishing, the most appalling and heartbreaking, and the one that most sets us apart from the rest of the self-describing world. Is it possible in America to be pretty much who you want to be? More of us think so than believe in life after death.

Almost all of us, in fact. Of the next 10 people who you meet, 8.5 will bear a faith in their unlimited opportunity. The ability to become a ballerina, physicist, holder of patents, teacher of poetry, real estate mogul, pro basketball player, senator, ambassador, president or even a TV-show host. Pretty much whoever you want to be. A third of everyone in line at the supermarket will be dreaming of fame -- recording contracts, movie offers -- and the great majority of those will consider such dreams realizable. We live in a vast, affirming Levittown, on a double lot between Walter Mitty and Gordon Gekko, our desperation quiet to mute, our belief in boundless opportunity raucous.

Ever since the sudden eruption of this continent, European Americans have lived on the edge of an open frontier. Screw things up back East, and you can always light out for the territories. The fact that 85 percent of Americans still feel they have no limits suggests that, even centuries on, the frontier remains untapped and open for homesteading.

Pretty much who you want to be: five seconds of reflection exposes the equally limitless absurdity. Do 8.5 of the next 10 people you meet have a badger's chance at a dog show of becoming a brain surgeon or socializing in Hyannisport? But then, perhaps, they never wanted to. Perhaps, in America, everyone is already pretty much who they want to be, or at least happy in their infinite fallbacks. This is the secret flip side to the American dream: our embrace of endless opportunity may clothe an equally happy acceptance of the most normative social control. In America, you wouldn't want to be what you pretty much couldn't be. In the language of the marketplace -- our true, infinite frontier -- who says you can't have it all? Just don't ask what all may be.

Three years after Frederick Jackson Turner gave his famous lecture, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," and two years after Edward Stratemeyer (of Hardy Boys and Tom Swift fame) published the first volume in his "Bound to Succeed" series, W. E. B. DuBois began the groundbreaking study, "The Philadelphia Negro." In it, DuBois wrote: "The humblest white employee knows that the better he does his work the more chance there is for him to rise in the business. The black employee knows that the better he does his work the longer he may do it." What an American wants to become has forever depended on who he is allowed to be.

Since the dream of unlimited self-realization has survived slavery and segregation, perhaps I shouldn't be shocked that 85 percent of us still assert it only eight years after one of the worst race riots in American history. But then almost half of us believe that race plays "not much role" in who we are, including three-quarters of African-Americans polled. Hispanic believers slightly outnumber whites.

Nor does economic class much trouble our belief in universal attainment. While 90 percent of people making more than \$75,000 assert their unlimited potential, even people making \$30,000 or less still sign on at the rate of 82 percent. Those of us who are not winning even the financial

part of the race want to believe that our children still might.

The market keeps building us new room to believe, ever more American territories to light out for. Kept in reserve by God and rising up from the filled-in map, the infant Internet promises endless new vistas for self-creation. In this newfound America, everyone can register her own domain name. As gold rushes go, the Information Age threatens to leave the Gilded Age in the pyrite dust. Microsoft alone has produced as many as 5,000 millionaires.

Belief in the digital boom's democracy has, in some ways, democratized it. Almost half of Americans now own stock -- up from 14 percent in 1980. A staggering increase in paper worth has led to an even more staggering sense of paper opportunity. But in the race to be all we can be, consumer debt is mushrooming without any limits of its own. Personal bankruptcies have quadrupled over the last decade, neatly pacing the Dow. We're not afraid of losing all we have. But we're terrified of losing a chance to have it all.

Perhaps for this reason more than a third of us sometimes lament that our lives did not turn out as we wished. A third have visited therapists. Half know someone who has tried to commit suicide. Half of us think we don't get enough credit for what we do. We seem to be free to be everything we want -- except content.

For possibility and contentment may be sworn enemies. Pure potential and its despair combine to create the ideal late-capitalist perpetual-motion engine, with self-realization powering the drive train. So long as we believe there is no ceiling, there will be no end to the effort we'll expend on the way to self-making. Be all you can be. Go for the gusto. Such cheerleading cloaks the sharpest spurs ever invented. For in this country, if you don't become all that you pretty much want, you've only your own indolence to blame.

Discount these grumblings as the duty of a writer. Horatio Alger and the Stratemeyer Syndicate aside, American novelists from Hawthorne through DeLillo have forever made a living by waking America from its dream. Writers, to become pretty much what they want to be, often feel the need to leave the land of endless opportunity. Baldwin, Wright and DuBois (for reasons that almost half of those polled dismiss), Stein (the majority of respondents oppose same-sex marriages), James, Wharton, Hemingway: endless potential drove them away, to realize themselves elsewhere.

But also pardon this returnee's confession. However I would answer the question, I, too, imagine that I might have become, in some hypothetical America, anything I cared enough to be. Something in me carries around this stamp of citizenship.

In America, de Tocqueville said, with only a tincture of French tannic acid, "No natural boundary seems to be set to the effort of man; and in his eyes what is not yet done, is only what he has not yet attempted to do."

Under the burden of becoming anything we hope, between the dream of realization and our waking reality, we've created the most mercilessly productive country on earth. In believing that only the attempt stands between us and what's not yet done, we Americans, for better and for worse, will, in time, do pretty much everything we want, and then some.

**From “What is an American?” *Letters from an American Farmer* by Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur**

I wish I could be acquainted with the feelings and thoughts which must agitate the heart and present themselves to the mind of an enlightened Englishman, when he first lands on this continent. He must greatly rejoice that he lived at a time to see this fair country discovered and settled; he must necessarily feel a share of national pride, when he views the chain of settlements which embellishes these extended shores. When he says to himself, this is the work of my countrymen, who, when **convulsed** by factions, afflicted by a variety of miseries and wants, restless and impatient, took refuge here. They brought along with them their national genius, to which they principally owe what liberty they enjoy, and what substance they possess. Here he sees the industry of his native country displayed in a new manner, and traces in their works the embryos of all the arts, sciences, and ingenuity which flourish in Europe. Here he beholds fair cities, substantial villages, extensive fields, an immense country filled with decent houses, good roads, orchards, meadows, and bridges, where an hundred years ago all was wild, woody, and uncultivated!

What a train of pleasing ideas this fair spectacle must suggest; it is a prospect which must inspire a good citizen with the most heartfelt pleasure. The difficulty consists in the manner of viewing so extensive a scene. He is arrived on a new continent; a modern society offers itself to his contemplation, different from what he had hitherto seen. It is not composed, as in Europe, of great lords who possess everything, and of a herd of people who have nothing. Here are no **aristocratical** families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one; no great manufacturers employing thousands, no great refinements of luxury. The rich and the poor are not so far removed from each other as they are in Europe.

Some few towns excepted, we are all tillers of the earth, from Nova Scotia to West Florida. We are a people of cultivators, scattered over an immense territory, communicating with each other by means of good roads and navigable rivers, united by the silken bands of mild government, all respecting the laws, without dreading their power, because they are **equitable**. We are all animated with the spirit of an industry which is **unfettered** and unrestrained, because each person works for himself. If he travels through our rural districts he views not the hostile castle, and the haughty mansion, contrasted with the clay-built hut and miserable cabin, where cattle and men help to keep each other warm, and dwell in meanness, smoke, and indigence. A pleasing uniformity of decent competence appears throughout our habitations. The meanest of our log-houses is a dry and comfortable habitation.

Lawyer or merchant are the fairest titles our towns afford; that of a farmer is the only **appellation** of the rural inhabitants of our country. It must take some time ere he can reconcile himself to our dictionary, which is but short in words of dignity, and names of honour. There, on a Sunday, he sees a congregation of respectable farmers and their wives, all clad in neat homespun, well mounted, or riding in their own humble wagons. There is not among them an esquire, saving the unlettered magistrate. There he sees a parson as simple as his flock, a farmer who does not riot on the labour of others. We have no princes, for whom we toil, starve, and bleed: we are the most perfect society now existing in the world. Here man is free as he ought to be; nor is this pleasing equality so transitory as many others are. Many ages will not see the shores of our great lakes replenished with inland nations, nor the unknown bounds of North America entirely peopled. Who can tell how far it extends? Who can tell the millions of men whom it will feed and contain? for no European foot has as yet travelled half the extent of this mighty continent!

de Crèvecoeur, Hector St. John, "Letter III: What is an American?" Letters from an American Farmer. New York: E.P. Dutton (1957) p. 35.