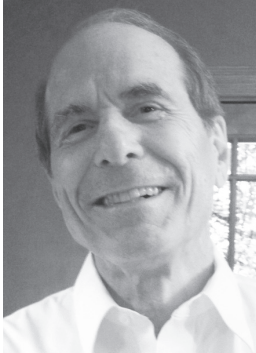


American Dream

By Steven DeLair



Steven DeLair

Steven DeLair is the great-grandchild of pioneers and the son of working class parents who preached the value and importance of education. Born in Cheyenne, Wyoming, and raised mostly in Lincoln, Nebraska, he received a BFA from the University of Nebraska in 1967.

Leaving Nebraska, he entered the Marine Corps Officers Candidate School in Quantico, Virginia, where he was commissioned a Second Lieutenant. He subsequently served as an Infantry Platoon Commander and Battalion Civil Affairs Officer in South Vietnam for 13 months in 1968 and 1969.

He resigned from the Marines as a Captain and took a position with a large insurance company in southern California, eventually transferring to Scottsdale, Arizona with the same company. In 1981 he left the insurance business and began his career as an artist (painter), which he continues today.

Steven has been represented by several galleries in the U.S. and has participated in juried group exhibitions nationwide.

In 1996 he returned to Lincoln with his wife, Sally. He has one son with Sally and one daughter from his first wife, Cheryle, who passed away in 1979.

Dear Optimist and Pessimist,

While you were making your profound, eloquent and expansive arguments concerning the proverbial glass of water—I drank it.

Sincerely,
The Opportunist

The hope for a better tomorrow has no doubt been with the human race for thousands of years, but for a very long time that hope, for the most part, remained dim as the battle for survival dominated life. Deep contemplation of the future did not enter the mind's eye until much later in our history, when existence and the thought of it could include consideration of a possible improvement of life itself. From this perspective, the concept of a future being better than a present is relatively new.

The quality of life did slowly improve over the centuries, but not until America's founding was there such a radical and formal proclamation as "all men are created equal" and "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." That this proclamation was later acted upon, at the risk of life and treasure by an intellectual and social elite, and subsequently written into law, was as improbable as it was courageous.

This founding in freedom, with the rule and force of law, enabling average citizens to pursue a self-defined process to improve their condition in life, was a concept of startling world significance. That it was not at first understood to apply to all people does not diminish the importance of the lawful pursuit of happiness being established as a God given right.

Throughout the years after our founding, the "American dream" became a part of a national ethos, with varying definitions. The phrase entered the popular lexicon in *The Epic of America*, by historian James Truslow Adams: "It is not a dream of motorcars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of fortuitous circumstances of birth or position."

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Concerning those circumstances of birth, in 1963 a very courageous young leader and advocate for millions of those who were excluded from our nation's founding wrote the following in his "Letter From a Birmingham Jail": "We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands. [...] When these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for what is best in

the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence” (King 301-02).

The 1790 U.S. Census counted 3,893,635 as the total population of the U.S. and its territory. Of that number, 694,280 were slaves—almost 18% of the population.

Dr. King’s reference to the “most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage” was one of the subjects of an address made by the famed Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn at Harvard University in the summer of 1978. In his address entitled “A World Split Apart,” Solzhenitsyn said, “The constant desire to have still more things and a still better life and the struggle to obtain them imprints many western faces with worry and even depression. The majority of people have been granted well-being to an extent their fathers and grandfathers could not even dream about.” He continued, “Today, well-being in the life of Western society has begun to reveal its pernicious mask.”

Solzhenitsyn was not a critic of the West. He was a critic of what he viewed as our weakness: the abandonment of the spiritual and religious foundation that made the West great. Writer Adam Gopnik characterized it as “incomes go up, steeples go down.”

In contrast, Professor of Sociology Sandra Hanson and public opinion pollster John Zogby have reported that numerous public opinion polls taken from the 1980s to 2010 indicate that the majority of Americans feel that the American dream for their family is more about spiritual happiness than material goods.

The past thirty years of ever-increasing globalization combined with

the recent destructive recession have contributed to a growing ambivalence concerning the American dream. Optimism about the future has historically been strong in the U. S., especially during the post-war decades from 1945 to 1975. America’s relatively small sacrifice compared to the other combatants in World War II lifted our country out of the great depression and set the stage for U.S. world hegemony. The post-war economic boom engendered prosperity beyond our ancestor’s comprehension, as noted by Solzhenitsyn. With our industrial capacity and infrastructure intact, post-war America resumed its growth and prosperity while the rest of the industrial world, with a few exceptions, was in the process of regaining their senses. The victory in World War II and the subsequent years of prosperity blurred our optimism with rising expectations that were not always rational.

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The U.S. has always been a trading nation, but the expansion of trade after the war increased to historic levels. Economists usually refer to globalization as the international integration in commodity, capital and labor markets. Globalization is not new, but the size and scope combined with the export of capital and

technology is new.¹ Economically speaking, there have been major positive developments in the world because of expanded world trade. “Ironically, it is the very improvement in the economic well-being of hundreds of millions of people that raised the world’s consciousness about poverty and inequality” said Robert Lerman of the Urban Institute. “The growing world recognition of massive disparities between rich and poor does not necessarily mean that economic inequality is worsening or that poverty is spreading.” He also notes, “until a few hundred years ago, almost everyone experienced material poverty.” Dr. Lerman refers to the studies of Columbia University professor Xavier Sala-I-Martin and his comprehensive 2002 analysis, which states, “the share of the world’s population in severe poverty declined by two-thirds between 1970 and 1998. Even though the world population grew by 1.5 billion between 1980 and 1998, the number experiencing severe poverty declined by 160 million.”

Bill Gates, speaking on behalf of The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, told an interviewer that it is a myth that world poverty is out of control. The severe poverty rate is lower than any time in history.

Somewhat against the grain of the preceding, mostly positive, analysis is Pope Francis’s “Joy of the Gospel,” which was published in November 2013. This Papal exhortation consists of five chapters and 51,000 words; a small part of it is devoted to the new global economic paradigm of growth and consumption.

Humanity is experiencing a turning point in its history as we see from the advances being made in so many fields. We can only praise the steps being taken to improve people’s welfare in areas such as healthcare, education and communications. At the same

time we have to remember that the majorities of our contemporaries are barely living from day to day, with dire consequences. A number of diseases are spreading. The hearts of many people are gripped by fear and desperation, even in the so-called rich countries. [...] To sustain a lifestyle which excludes others, or to sustain enthusiasm for that selfish ideal, a globalization of indifference has developed. (44)

The Pope also uses the term “spiritual desertification” to describe the process of trying to build a society void of God, with the subsequent elimination of our Christian roots. This passage is only one piece of the Pope’s theologically driven opinion of the global era, but it is representative of his views on this subject.

In April of 2012, June Zaccone, Professor of Economics (Emerita) at Hofstra University, presented a paper at Columbia University in response to the prevailing economic wisdom and in particular to Michael Spence, the 2001 Nobel Prize winner in Economic Science. (Spence’s article “The Impact of Globalization on Income and Employment” typifies the influential positive analysis of the global era.) Professor Zaccone writes:

The mainstream view of globalization is that it is good for just about everyone—economies rich and poor grow faster and the incomes of workers everywhere rise faster. There may be a slight exception permitted for unskilled workers, but their problem is they need training. In any case, there is nothing to be done against the forces driving globalization. It is described as a natural market evolution, created by new technologies and better techniques permitting the effective management of far-flung operations. The reality is quite different. Technology has

permitted globalization, which has been furthered by governments, especially ours, pursuing a corporate agenda. In the U. S., growth has slowed, worker’s incomes have stagnated, inequality has risen to Gilded Age levels and the middle class has been splintered as jobs have disappeared. A few have joined top income levels, with far more pushed down to lower-skill, lower-wage service jobs.

Income inequality comes from the top extreme high income group and is not strongly associated with intergenerational mobility in the U.S.

The major concern of her paper is the harm done to the U.S. economy and its workers during the global era; nor is she convinced that workers in poor countries as a whole have benefited to the degree touted by the mainstream. She notes that the U.S. Census has projected that people of color, which includes Asians and Native Americans, will be the majority by 2042. She asks a very important question: “what will the economic and social prospects be then, if we don’t improve their life chances?”

Expanding technology and the outsourcing of jobs have been the predominant sources of American job loss. Varying degrees of fear and anxiety about the future are widespread in the U.S. Many Americans sense that we are losing our ability to control our own destiny. Our politically polarized society gives rise to intransigence in Washington D. C. Income inequality and economic mobility are the subject of much debate.

Despite this debate, Greg Shaw and Laura Goffey, writing in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, state that “an examination of polls focused on inequality, taxes and mobility conducted between 1990 and 2011 reveals that American public opinion has remained fairly stable on these issues, despite changing political and economic conditions. There has been no dramatic shift of public opinion on these issues. Economic inequality, the government’s role of redistribution, and taxation policies will likely remain divisive political issues in coming years in light of no public opinion on how to address growing economic inequality.”

Is economic or social mobility declining in the U.S. as compared to other Western countries? In a National Bureau of Economics Research Study, “new evidence suggests that intergenerational mobility is fairly stable overtime in each of the nine census divisions of the United States even though they have very different levels of mobility.” The rungs of the economic ladder have grown further apart, which represents increased inequality, but children’s chances of climbing from lower to higher rungs have not changed. Income inequality comes from the top extreme high income group and is not strongly associated with intergenerational mobility in the U.S. “In light of the finding in our companion paper on the geography of mobility,” the authors state, “the key issue is not that prospects for upward mobility are declining but

rather than some regions of the U.S. persistently offer less mobility than most other developed countries” (Chetty).

A more provocative view by professor of economics and author Gregory Clark was featured in a recent *New York Times* article. Professor Clark believes that “the compulsion to strive, the talent to prosper and the ability to overcome failure are strongly inherited.” In addition, “alternative explanations that are in vogue—cultural traits, family economic resources, social networks—don’t hold up to scrutiny.” In a *Mother Jones* magazine interview, Clark said, “modern societies haven’t managed to increase social mobility above what it was in pre-industrial societies” (Harkinson). In his book *The Son Also Rises: Surnames and the History of Social Mobility*, Professor Clark details his creative and original methods of research using surname history in a diverse group of countries that predicted a high correlation of status across generations. If his analysis is only partially correct, it further complicates the debate over whether governmental policy should aim to help ameliorate life’s inherent unfairness, which, if Clark is correct, begins at birth.

The global era has been scrutinized by many credible economists and others who, not surprisingly, come to different conclusions about the effects of this new world economic paradigm. The global era is complicated, and the analysis of information concerning it reflects that complexity. Despite the diversity of thought, there is sufficient understanding and knowledge to support the argument that for the greater world of developing and poor countries, with some exceptions, the economic gains in the global era have been dramatic. We are living in a profoundly historic era in regard to hundreds of millions of people who are no longer in severe poverty. Whether

this improvement is sustainable over the long-term is yet to be seen.

For the U. S., the global era has been a winner for the corporate sector and obviously for millions of their shareholders. We can also acknowledge that everyone generally pays less for goods and services. The losers are the unemployed, underemployed, and those affected by wage stagnation. The social cost of disrupted lives, including government spending to lessen the negative effects of those losses, is not easy to calculate.

The fact that a modern competitive culture is increasingly populated by seriously dysfunctional, truncated families at the very time when a relatively healthy family structure is at the apex of need portends a future unlike anything witnessed in American history.

Despite those negatives (which are considerable), the preponderance of evidence, including our shared cultural capital and dynamism, point to an American dream that is shaken but alive and well. However, some of our largest social problems may have an increasing and profoundly negative impact on the future viability of the collective American dream that is inclusive of all people.

On January 8, 1964, President Johnson declared the War on Poverty. The current poverty rate according to the U.S. Census is about 15%, compared to 17.3% in 1965. The population of the U.S. has increased by approximately 122 million since 1965, however, so even at this slightly lowered rate, the total number of poor people in the U.S. is now 46.5 million, which equates to the total population of Spain. For those individuals and families who work hard and are prepared to meet the challenges of the 21st century, the dream for a good life is realistic. For those who are not prepared, the dream, if there is one, is probably wishful thinking.

Today, there are 24 million children living in fatherless homes. Almost half of all children in America are growing up in poverty, according to the U.S. Census. Out-of-wedlock births to mothers under age 30 are now over 50%. The negative social ramifications of these statistics are well known and documented. Our growing underclass is not prepared for the demands of the modern global world. The complexity of this problem defies any and all simple remedies. The fact that a modern competitive culture is increasingly populated by seriously dysfunctional, truncated families at the very time when a relatively healthy family structure is at the apex of need portends a future unlike anything witnessed in American history.

Is it possible for a modern wealthy nation in the global era to successfully coexist with increasing numbers of its population who are disconnected from its institutions and cultural ethos? In the Pope’s previously mentioned exhortation, he says, “the family is experiencing a profound cultural crisis as are all communities and social bonds.” He calls the family “the fundamental cell of society” and asserts, “the indispensable contribution of marriage to society transcends the feelings and momentary needs of the couple.”

Do we have the collective ability to focus national attention to this or any other large problem? Do we have the will, the time or even a forum to contemplate and discuss these issues without our ubiquitous ideological blinders? Unfortunately, there is a dark side to the information age and our constant connectivity to an ever-expanding stream of diffused communication media. Some call it information overload.

Are we able to decipher the big picture of our individual and collective lives in the context of history and our present reality?

Perhaps Maggie Jackson said it best in her book *Distraction*.

Heads down, we are allowing ourselves to be ever-more-entranced by the unsifted trivia of life. With splintered focus, we're cultivating a culture of distraction and detachment. We are eroding attention—the most crucial building block of wisdom, memory and ultimately the key to societal progress. In attention, we find the powers of selection and focus we so badly need in order to carve knowledge from the vast, shifting and ebbing oceans of information. (235)

Is wisdom still relevant in contemporary America? Are we enamored by the “smart” and facile

agility to navigate in the moment, with little knowledge or value of the past—without thought beyond the immediate future? Are we capable of separating the important information from the trivial or irrelevant? Are we able to decipher the big picture of our individual and collective lives in the context of history and our present reality? If we can, do we have the wisdom to construct long-term visions, which can lead to realistic long-term goals and solutions? Or, are we reconciled to the notion that it is perpetually the best of times and the worst of times?

The future of the American Dream lies in the answers to those questions.

Notes

1 Many people have the mistaken view that the increase of world trade, or globalization as we now commonly refer to it, was purely a capitalist enrichment strategy. In fact, the recent impetus for this tremendous surge in world trade was the Atlantic Charter signed by President Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in August of 1941. This charter defined a post-war vision that included lower trade barriers, the advancement of global social welfare, and economic cooperation. The lack of these things, many then thought, had been a major cause of the war. The Atlantic Charter was the catalyst for the establishment of the United Nations. Previous attempts to promote collective world security, such as the League of Nations, had not been successful, but could commerce and welfare succeed where diplomacy had failed?

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