The American Dream: Then and Now
Reinterpreting the American Dream by Patrick Primeaux
Review by: Gina Vega
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I am an American. I had never felt particularly American until one mild day in May, 1996. I was teaching in a summer program at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada, and, never having seen the Canadian Rockies, I suggested a day trip to one of my colleagues. We asked the department secretary for directions and she gave them willingly, reminding us to check if the pass was open, because if the pass was closed we would be unable to get through the foothills. “What do you mean, ‘check if the pass is open’ or else we can’t get there? I’m a New Yorker—I go wherever I want,” was my naive and self-congratulatory rejoinder.

I apologize to genial Canadians across the breadth of the land for the ugliness of my statement, but it describes very well the attitude that we Americans swallow along with our morning corn flakes. A sense of entitlement, of control over events and even nature, and the confidence that deep pockets and safe shores traditionally brought to our actions is what prompted my disbelief that a desired pleasure jaunt could be prohibited by a closed mountain pass. It was beyond the limit of my very American vision. However, as we have read, heard, or expressed every day since September 11, 2001, everything has changed and we can’t go back.

The American Dream and what it represented before that date figured significantly in generating the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the attacks that have forced Americans to re-examine their priorities. The American Dream today, and its continuing emphasis on economic success as the measure of social well-being, generates chills down the spine of my American psyche. In the
post-Thanksgiving 2001 season, we were enjoined by the President of United States, our governors, local Chambers of Commerce, the press in all media, and the shopping mall up the street to spend our money and save the economy. It was incumbent upon every American to prove that materialism would save the economic day, as our military would rout out and destroy terrorism around the world. As Fr. Pat Primeaux wrote in *Reinterpreting the American Dream*, "It is the American Dream and its inherent greed and selfishness which have led us towards a myopic self-absorption so powerful that it would deter us from consideration of others." Have we taken no lesson from America's tragedy?

In the interest of full disclosure and in acknowledgement of the closely linked relationships of the ethics community in the academic world, it is important to note that Pat Primeaux and I have been friends and scholarly collaborators for years, so what I will describe in this essay reflects as much my work as it does his.

*The Immediacy of Altruism*

In the aftermath of the September attacks, the immediate response of the American people was altruistic. We stood in the long lines all over America, lines that snaked around city blocks and town squares, to give blood for our fallen countrymen and for those who rushed to be part of the rescue effort. Businesses shut down, even those far from the attack locations, out of respect for the fallen. The nation shared a day of mourning on September 14, 2001. We prayed together, each in our own way, for those who died and for those who lived. We prayed for our leaders, for their wisdom, and for our own strength to move forward. We prayed for guidance. We prayed for justice and we prayed for peace.

Since American relationships are predominantly transactional relationships, we "gave" in the only ways we knew how—in money, in blood, in the actions of emergency workers, and in words of prayer. In the three weeks following the attacks, more than $757 million was donated nationwide to various relief efforts.1 So many people donated blood in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center, that donors had to be turned aside due to the short shelf-life (six weeks) of red blood cells.2 Poignant stories were told of people who refused to leave their co-workers and died with them, people who went back again and again to help others out of the rubble, courageous airline personnel and passengers sacrificing themselves to save others, willingly or unwittingly. We gave in the hope that somehow our giving could assuage the pain of the survivors, alleviate our own survivor guilt, create meaning out of tragedy. A dramatic rise in flag display, in the singing of our national hymns, in tearful salutes, and in adamant proclamations against the forces of evil in the world suggested that we were coming to realize the importance of community, of togetherness, and of interdependence in all phases of life.
For a brief moment, America entered into a period of introspection, of self-examination, of reconsideration of our national and personal value systems. What has been so despicable about our American lifestyle, we wondered, that others would sacrifice their lives to strike a blow against it? Pat Primeaux’s book suggests that the answer lies within the question:

We give to others because it does something for us, because there is a return on the investment. Individuals and multi-national corporations contribute to social education, and artistic programs because giving boosts their images, and because it brings their names and their products into prominence. They are about wealth and distinction, and want to let others know they have achieved them to the extent that they have enough to give some away. In the world of business, we have coined a phrase for that kind of giving. We commonly refer to it as “social responsibility. (21)

This social responsibility is an unshakeable component of the American Dream, which measures the success of individuals on their ability to earn and to spend, to provide utility and to consume, to be recognized and thus to obtain prestige. Our social worth depends upon our personal utility. Happiness equals success, and success equals wealth and achievement. This is the theme that courses through *Reinterpreting the American Dream*, leading us to conclusions that we wish weren’t so, but fear that they are. Above all, the American Dream is an economic dream. The goods for which we strive are material goods and our strength as a nation is measured by the sturdiness of our stock markets. Although the values for which we stand today originated in liberty and justice for all, this freedom came with no strings attached for those who shared in it—no insistence on community as did the French three-part demand for freedom of the same time (liberté, égalité, fraternité). Our American perspective is that we, as individuals, have rights that are personal, rather than rights that exist in relation to others. 3

Inextricably tangled with the idea of happiness and success is the belief that we attain success by dint of our own efforts. We come into this world alone, we leave this world alone, and between the entry and the departure, we must make our own way, depending on ourselves and looking after our needs. We are a nation of individualists, driven to prove our competencies and talents and to reap the rewards thereof. The erosion over the last decades of the social contract between worker and employer is a clear indication that we have taken the idea of personal responsibility very seriously. We can no longer depend on others to look after us and our needs for the long term—our careers are in our own hands, our jobs may disappear tomorrow, our retirement security depends on our saving and investment skills rather than on the protection of our government, our children cannot be certain of receiving a good education in many of the public school systems in our nation. For these reasons, among others, Americans continue to seek our freedom in economic terms.
Reflection and an Alternate Path

We spend so much time striving to advance ourselves, we have little opportunity left for reflection about who we are or where we may be going. As Primeaux states,

A more accurate reflection of our identities arises from assessing ourselves in the present moment rather than with respect to the future. ‘What do I do now?’ For one thing, that question divests us of any kind of wishful thinking or projections—valid or invalid—into some other time or place. It also releases us from incrementally and chronologically identifying ourselves and our values, from putting off until tomorrow what we want for ourselves today. (76)

Life takes on a certain urgency, and this urgency presses us forward to action rather than introspection. It has been said that women tend to be more reflective and succumb less to the call to action than do men. However, women have been lured into the same patterns that have failed men; we have been convinced by society that we can “have it all.” Recalling a TV commercial from the early 1980s for perfume, women were enjoined to emulate a beautiful actress who could “bring home the bacon, cook it up in a pan, and never never let him forget he’s a man.” Career person, housewife and mother, and sex object—we could have it all.

But when they tried this path, many women discovered that they simply were unable to attain this ideal of the American Dream of the liberated woman. They had become liberated from one lifestyle that had enslaved them to the home but had become enslaved by another that shifted that slavery to every aspect of their lives. They begged for someone to cut them some slack, to release them from the perfection demanded by America’s Dream of success. But another decade had to pass before women could be convinced that they didn’t have to accomplish everything at once and that they could indeed, “have it all” if they sequenced these experiences properly.

The “correct” sequence for many women striving to attain the American Dream was (1) career, (2) long term relationship or marriage, and (3) building a family. People married later in life—in 1990, the average age for women to marry was 26.7 years of age—and often found themselves racing their biological clocks to the delivery room. More and more women were having their first babies after the age of thirty, and limiting the number of children they would have—the birth rate of women between 26 and 34 was 1381 per thousand and for women between 35 and 44 was 1960 per thousand. Nowhere in this hectic, frantic, sequentialed existence was there room for a focus on the transcendent. Who had the time? Time—the most precious and non-renewable of resources—was being applied elsewhere.

We have chosen to apply this resource most frequently to our work—Americans are working more in relation to their earlier twentieth-century experience than anyone in the world. Particularly among professional and managerial workers,
the proportion of Americans who work more than 50 hours per week has risen by more than a third since 1985 and this trend shows no sign of abating, despite a recession and loss of jobs. People simply work harder and longer hours in order to provide a safety net for their families. Since the 1970s, futurists have been warning us about the potential social dangers associated with uncontrolled economic growth and purely econocentric national policies, yet we have not heeded these warnings. Choices made in the context of economic values in the past describe and define our human values today.

Primeaux suggests that our ethics—our self-description and identity as individuals—arise from our values and that we follow laws and rules because we are striving to meet the expectations of others who may have control over our lives or our successes. We differentiate between the “oughts” of our lives, the rules and laws and demands of those in authority, and our own sense of self, the personal beliefs that would link us to others voluntarily and to the transcendent serendipitously. There is nothing in the American Dream that encourages us to look beyond ourselves and our own needs, to take the time to reflect and consider alternate paths to success and alternate definitions of happiness:

Concentrating our time and energy on work, our actions reflect the extent to which we identify ourselves with respect to our jobs and our careers. Those long hours of concentration and dedication also reflect the extent to which we have bought into the American dream and its dominant values, wealth and distinction. And if we manage to extricate ourselves from pursuing those values, we readily see how little time and energy is expended in pursuit of the values of surrender and compassion or those of synthesis and transcendence. (82)

We tend to apply an economic analysis, a cost-benefit calculus, to our actions towards one another. Taking responsibility for ourselves and being the winners in what we perceive as a contest of strength, of will, and of religious fortitude, has developed in Americans an itch for action and for achievement. The extreme over-focus on work devolves directly from the value system that we have adopted. Far beyond the original demands of the Protestant ethic, we continue to increase the hours we spend working and decrease the separation between work and home such that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we are constantly seeking new ways to make it convenient to work at home. The growth of telework, of alternate work locations, of shared jobs, and a 24 x 7 x 365 workplace provide striking reminders of the American terror of introspection, the demon that is kept at bay by action.

Our economic model actually prescribes introspection, consideration of others, and a focus on spirituality or the transcendent. There is no room in the American Dream for such things. According to the theory of opportunity costs, we have a finite measure of resources, which we apply according to our belief in the best return for the investment. When we reallocate resources, we automatically reduce the original allocation and redirect that resource to another use, a use whose payback is neither understood nor guaranteed.
We are thus tyrannized by opportunity costs. Each moment that we might use in introspection, in spirituality, or in concern for interdependence is a moment that is not being used for the accumulation of wealth and material success, i.e., happiness. We have backed ourselves into a philosophical corner in which either position will make us miserable and neither will make us happy. If we continue to pursue the American Dream as an economic goal that is valid only for those of us who live in the United States, we will continue to incur the wrath of the disenfranchised. If we redirect ourselves towards interdependence and spirituality, we will be unhappy because we will not be able to attain success as it has been defined in our culture. We are lost if we continue to demand either/or solutions to the complex problems posed by the American Dream in relation to the rest of the world.

Breaking Free

What could we be doing with the scarcest, most limited and un-renewable resource—our time? We could consider making the space for spirituality in a way that fits with our American cultural traditions. Further, we could consider moving beyond the rhetoric of interdependence towards a deeper understanding of how to break free from some of the culturally determined behavior that we practice.

We have been enacting the role of the "Ugly American" since the 1950s, and this tradition is hard to break. Nearly forty-five years ago, in 1958, William Lederer wrote The Ugly American to describe our behavior during the Cold War. The Americans in this book were arrogant, self-satisfied, and clumsy self-styled saviors of cultures about which they were ignorant. This behavior was true of many Americans who traveled to other countries during that period, and has continued to the present. According to Lederer himself in a recent interview, "the United States Army does not have a single person in its ranks who speaks Pashto, the language of the Taliban." One wonders how the language spoken by a group that had been previously identified as potentially dangerous to our country could be overlooked by the Army. Perhaps the answer has to do with our approach to cultures in opposition to our own: ignore them and they'll go away. But, as we have learned, they do not go away, any more than our personal or individual needs "go away."

One way to understand behavior is to compare what people believe and what they practice, espoused values and enacted values. The espoused values of the American people focus on equality, on freedom and justice for all, on protection of all, clearly communal concerns. Even our mottos, such as "United we stand, divided we fall," and "E pluribus unum" direct our attention to the importance of the group.

But our enacted values tell a different story. We are a nation of individuals, and proud to call ourselves such. We reward individual achievement, we cherish each person's right to excel and stand out, and we celebrate uniqueness. We like being named the most powerful nation in the world, the wealthiest nation,
the most influential nation. These hard-won titles put the lie to our formal expressions of community and interdependence. Our motto, in effect, is closer to "We’re Number One!" than it is to "One for all and all for one." Beyond the rote words of our Pledge of Allegiance, at no point do we include the infinite, the spiritual, or the transcendent in our consciousness.

The estrangement of the individual from the communal and spiritual is supported by our national institutions. Our legal system is a case-based system rather than one based on justice or equity (or some other value). Our penal system is a punitive rather than rehabilitative system. Retaliation and vengeance are the most common responses of our military system. Idolization of athletes and movie stars, as demonstrated by inflated salaries, support the code of individuality. We applaud the individual’s successes, at least until the individual becomes too successful, at which point we try to destroy his accomplishments.

There exists a significant gap between what we claim we believe and the way our reward structure is designed. The result is ambivalence about our true values. We have allowed only one description of the American Dream to prevail, but there are other descriptions that could be considered. Independence is not the only route to freedom; there are multiple paths to that end. The initial building block of freedom is physiological protection—the basics of survival. These basics are most easily attained through interdependence. Humans are social animals—we have a visceral need to group together for survival. Even Americans cannot survive alone.

Despite Primeaux’s belief that

[a]s the organizations of business are being reinvented, as we as persons are being reinvented, so, too, is the American Dream. It is being reinvented to incorporate the virtue of commitment and the values of transcendence and infinity into the already existing virtues and values of independence and dependence (196)

I fear that America is simply not getting the message that other countries are shouting at us. We, a nation rich in risk-takers and entrepreneurs, need to learn the lesson of interdependence. We need to learn that stockpiling wealth (food, money, weapons, technology, medicine) is a poor substitute for creating the interdependencies that support universal success. Having more does not necessarily mean living better, or dying better. Opening the door to spirituality does not require prioritizing introspection over action; it suggests instead acknowledging the importance of both and valuing both as integral to our live experience, and to our dream of a better America and a world of peace.

*Reinterpreting the American Dream* is an important book. Centered and concrete, it helps us to focus on our values and provides some ways to enact them so that our behavior adheres more closely to our beliefs. Pat Primeaux makes us think, and he does so in the language of popular culture and current issues, with an optimism that is sorely needed in America at this time.
Notes