



The Global Renaissance of the American Dream

The second aim of the Institute of World Culture, expressed in its *Declaration of Interdependence* invokes a number of potent terms and concepts that can inspire and serve as transformative ideals if not reduced to empty platitudes. Ideals that were courageously invoked centuries ago have been reduced to self-regarding justifications of personal pleasures and arrogant national assumptions about superior economic systems and lifestyles. Are there more authentic interpretations and practical applications of lofty terms such as freedom, excellence, conscience and self-transcendence? Can respectful study of the wave of protests that have swept the globe reveal a fresh understanding of the universal vision behind the American Dream? Is the mysterious source of bold vision that Tom Paine spoke of as the inspiration for his political thinking, alive and active in some of the protesters filling the public centers of Cairo, Moscow and New York to name a few?

The search for meaning is evident in the diverse references to the American Dream. Invocations of the American Dream are used to praise a great variety of values ranging from acquisition of a four bedroom home and a million dollar income to an intoxicating experience of freedom and self-transcendence. The common theme is opportunity – opportunity for improving one's conditions, capacities and quality of experiences. In America, it is commonly said, you can become anything you want and do anything you choose to do. Is this a fantasy or a real possibility? The elasticity in the term may make it meaningless if all it refers to is what I want for myself at a particular time. What coherency is there in a term personalized to serve trivial pleasures? If pursuit of the Dream is primarily a pursuit of material getting and spending, the Dream may become a Nightmare when cycles of economic interdependence shatter our illusions and destroy our gains. More secure is it to find a meaning that can persist within the core of ourselves and provide an adaptive, even creative response to our ever-changing

experiences. More ethical is it to find a meaning that improves, perhaps transforms, human character and contributes to the betterment of societal conditions.

Since there is no official or academic definition of the American Dream, we are left free to consider philosophically what might be a more meaningful, less vulnerable, even inspiring and sharable interpretation of the term. Aim# 2 of *The Declaration of Interdependence* refers to the universal vision behind the American Dream and the possibility of renewing it. The wave of protests that swept the globe during the past year provide ample evidence of a universal vision as well as the possibility of renewing the vision in conditions far removed from the debates among the founders of the American Republic in the late 18th century. When interviewed, many participants in the protest spoke of freedom as their primary goal. Freedom to speak, freedom of access to information, freedom to choose occupations and social relationships and freedom to choose their political leaders were common calls for change. Self-serving, long entrenched authoritarian governments have closed off all avenues of opportunity for free expression of self-chosen aspirations. Although the systems of authoritarian control were defended as necessary for law and order, their true purpose in the eyes of the protestors was maintaining very corrupt gains by elites. Thus social and economic injustice has been suffocating the inspiration for freedom.

The 18th century observer of American life, Hector de Crevecoeur, suggested that the liberty he observed in the lifestyles of American farmers was not just externalized behavior. Rather, he wrote in his essay "What is an American?" that "a new race of man" was emerging in conditions of freedom and equality. The distinguishing capacity of these "new men" was the creative use of the opportunity for "self-definition." The American is one who determines what he wants to become so that internal character is developed as part of the opportunities for material and social gains. For over two centuries, the testimonials of the young and of new immigrants to America have been full of declarations of a desire to define for oneself what one wants to become, what one wishes to accomplish and what relationships one seeks to create.

The path to what you choose to become runs parallel to a path seeking excellence. Athletes speak of surpassing their "personal best", but a great variety of visions of perfectibility and excellence have been sought for. In contemporary life, basic self-respect encourages us to consciously set standards and set up a process of experimentation and self-testing. Progress towards self-chosen ideals is fundamental to the human need to feel fulfilled in the journey of a human life. No wonder that among the thousands that fill centers of protest are the young who feel frustrated by the repressive systems that choke off opportunity for self-definition. Corrupt political and economic systems corrupt the natural pursuit and the just rewards of excellence by erecting walls of fear. Thus, millions of human beings are deprived of the most meaningful experiences of a life well-lived. Also, without the freedom to pursue ideals and exemplify merit, the entire social fabric is stained and torn. The natural and universal desire to "try my best", to set goals, to test my abilities and to serve others is blocked. The protesters are not necessarily hungry for food, but hungry for hope and experience of self-determined excellence.

Observed also in the recent waves of protest was a coming together of very diverse groups reflecting social classes, gender difference, ethnicity and religious views. By this self-transcendence and free interaction, centuries of traditional barriers were overcome and citizens could experience social solidarity and the unity of a common cause. Authoritarian governments rule by “divide and conquer.” Enclosed as elites are in a cocoon of self-regard, they could not have anticipated that the people they had controlled with instruments of terror could transcend social and sectarian barriers and stand together with strength to resist the blows of repression. Remarkable also was the ability of the protesters to invent quickly methods of self-government and provide the necessary services of security and sustenance. Volunteers flowed into the protests with food and commitment. Standing with others was more important for a time than going to work. This self-transcendence of personal identity and self-interest enhances the deeper meaningfulness of the protest and teaches a lasting lesson – that of social and psychological freedom expressed and experienced with courage.

Some protests accomplished more than others. Those that did succeed latched on to a very familiar tool -- that of an ever-evolving republic. The commonly perceived, historic model is the set of institutions and constitutional protections that the American founders used to organize an alternative to monarchy. However, a political system of laws passed by elected legislators, due process, independent judiciaries and protected civil liberties does not guarantee significant change or social and personal transformation. Unless leaders exemplify an authentic capacity for conscience and an ever-evolving commitment to serving the common good, any set of government institutions will stagnate and deteriorate into petty polarization. Until the public understands the principles they must use in reasoned thinking about public policy decisions, an ever-evolving republic of conscience nourished by ever-evolving pursuits of freedom, excellence and self-transcendence will live more as a faint Dream than as a reality.

Exploration of the ideas expressed in Aim # 2 and reflected in the current renaissance of the universal vision behind the American Dream is the primary purpose of the programs offered at the Institute of World Culture during 2012. We hope you will join with other life-long learners in considering a wide variety of topics ranging from art, architecture and literature to politics, leadership and economic justice. Should we not explore the possibility of an ever-evolving circle of world culture using the approach expressed by the American transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson? In Emerson’s words: “The life of man is an ever-evolving circle, which from a ring imperceptibly small rushes on all sides outward to new and larger circles, and that without end.” Is not every circle of thought and community made potent by the global interaction of past, present and future?

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