The American Dream is Not Out of Reach

In recent discussions of the American Dream, a controversial issue has been whether America still offers access to the American Dream to “…the tired, the poor, the huddled masses.” On the one hand, some argue that America remains the “Land of Opportunity,” where people can be born into poverty and still end up wealthy and successful. On the other hand, however, others have lost hope in the American Dream and believe that it doesn’t exist anymore. The American Dream is someone reaching his or her full potential, becoming successful, or finding happiness. Although some people may have to work harder than others to achieve this dream, it is still possible for everyone. The idealistic portrayal of our nation in early American literature is still accurate today.

In the poem “America the Beautiful” by Katherine Lee Bates, she describes the hopeful settling of our country in the lines:

O beautiful for pilgrim feet,
Whose stern impassioned stress
A thoroughfare for freedom beat
Across the wilderness (31).

The freedom Bates is discussing is the basis of the American Dream. An American citizen has the freedom to obtain an education in the school of his or her choice, and to pursue whatever career her or she chooses. Bates emphasizes that the first Americans wanted to find happiness
and to be successful in the New World. These brave explorers were the first American dreamers who paved the way for the rest of us. She goes on to celebrate the soldiers who fought and won freedom for America:

O beautiful for heroes proved
In liberating strife,
Who more than self their country loved
And mercy more than life (32)!

If it weren’t for the soldiers who fought for freedom in the American Revolution, we would not be as free as we are today. The words of this poem may sound idealistic, but they are an accurate depiction of the beginnings of the American Dream, and the dream is still accessible today.

In his essay “They Live the Dream,” Dan Rather relates a story about a man named Curtis Aikens, who went all through high school and three semesters of college without knowing how to read. At the age of twenty-six, he finally asked for help. Referring to his literacy tutors, he said, “They didn’t change my life. They saved my life” (45). Aikens faced the challenge of not knowing how to read, but worked hard to learn, and ended up owning his own produce company, becoming a food columnist, and publishing three cookbooks. He didn’t have his American Dream handed to him; he had to work hard, and he did what it took to realize his dream.

Those who understand that it won’t be easy, and who refuse to find an excuse to fail, have greater potential to succeed. This principle is illustrated in Beth McLaughlin’s article, “Lifelong Dreamer – Vietnam Boat Person.” This article reports the story of Nancy Pham, who arrived on a refugee boat from South Vietnam during the war. When she arrived in America, she had no money, no job, and she didn’t even speak English. As you may imagine, she faced many
struggles. She began taking English lessons and later became a student at Ma Chere Hair Style Academy. After establishing herself as a skilled stylist, Pham saw an opportunity to make her American Dream a reality when an old church went up for sale. She bought the space and modeled it into a beauty salon of her own. She had always dreamed of owning her own salon, and was determined to see it through (46). Though it took years of perseverance, Pham didn’t allow the fact that she was disadvantaged to keep her from succeeding. When an American has a dream, poverty, hardship, lack of education, and other disadvantages cannot keep it from coming true.

President Barack Obama’s grandfather had a dream. In his “Keynote Address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention,” then Senator Obama talks about his grandfather’s experiences as a domestic servant for the British, and his dream of better things for his son. Through hard work, he made it possible for Barack’s father to get a scholarship and study in America. While working in America, he found the woman who would later become Barack’s mother. Obama says, “They imagined me going to the best schools in the land, even though they weren’t rich, because in a generous America you don’t have to be rich to achieve your potential” (84). Obama hadn’t grown up in a rich, political family, but, despite the odds, he grew up to become president of the United States. In his words, “In no other country on earth is my story even possible” (84).

The stories of Curtis Aiken, Nancy Pham, and Barack Obama illustrate the opportunities America offers, as well as the obstacles that some need to overcome in order to achieve the American Dream. While there is no guarantee of success in this country, and while the citizens of America gave various and unequal starting points, the American Dream is still a reality. If one refuses to make excuses, if one expects obstacles and determines to overcome them, and if one has work ethic, he or she can achieve the American Dream. The drive it takes to achieve are
summed up in the lyrics of the song “Harlan Man” by Steve Earle: “I got me two good hands / and just as long as I’m able I won’t give in” (62).
Works Cited


