

CLASSIC

CONTEMPORARY

CROSS-CULTURAL

81 The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty

DAVID G. MYERS

Has life in the United States improved over the course of recent decades? According to David Myers, we live in the best of times because there has never been more material affluence. Yet we also live in the worst of times because many indicators of social health—including the rates of divorce, teen suicide, and violent crime—rose dramatically after 1960.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.

—CHARLES DICKENS, *A Tale of Two Cities*

We Americans embody a paradox. We read and hear it all around us. There are those who rightly claim, “We’ve never had it so good. Things are going *great* in this country!” And they are right. But then there are those who wring their hands and just as rightly worry that our civilization could collapse on its decaying moral infrastructure. The best of times, the worst of times. Wisdom, foolishness. Light, darkness. Hope, despair. Dickens’ words fit.

What are we to make of this seeming paradox? How can this be both the best and worst of times? And where do we go from here?

Source: “The Best of Times, the Worst of Times,” from *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*, by David G. Myers. Copyright © 2001 by Yale University Press.

IT IS THE BEST OF TIMES

We are fortunate to be living when we do. Moments ago, I made a cup of tea in a microwave oven, sat down in a comfortable ergonomic office chair in my climate-controlled office, turned on my personal computer, and answered electronic mail from friends in Hong Kong and Scotland. Planning for tomorrow’s trip, I check the Seattle weather forecast via the Web, then leap to a University of California survey archive to glean information for this [reading]. Gazing through my double-glazed window, I look across a landscaped courtyard to a state-of-the-art library that feeds to my desktop screen information hidden among millions of published articles. What a different world from the one I was born into barely half a century ago—a world without broadcast television, fax machines, computers, jets, or cell phones. . . .

Ethnic strife and hate crimes still haunt humanity, but in our part of the world bigotry is more gauche and diversity more accepted than ever before. The environment is under assault, but we

have awakened to the perils of deforestation, ozone depletion, and global warming and are taking steps to contain the damage. (We middle-aged adults drive cars that get twice the mileage and produce a twentieth the pollution of our first cars.) Our economy has produced a growing underclass. Yet our average disposable income in constant dollars is more than double that of the mid-1950s. This enables our having, among the other accouterments of our unprecedented national wealth, twice as many cars per person today as then and our eating out two and a half times as often.

More good news is bursting from all around:

- Although population has doubled since World War II, food production has tripled and food is cheaper than ever before.
- Welfare rolls are shrinking as joblessness reaches a quarter-century low.
- Inflation—the “cruellest tax”—is at a thirty-year low, interest rates have moderated, the dollar rides strong, and the stock market has touched undreamed-of heights.
- The prices of cars, air travel, gasoline, and hamburgers are at record real-dollar lows. The half gallon of milk that cost the average American thirty-nine minutes of work in 1919 now requires only seven minutes.
- The national budget, faster than anyone dared expect, has a substantial *surplus*.
- Since the early 1990s, the AIDS death rate has plummeted.
- Over the past half century, performance on intelligence tests has been rising, and race and class differences have lessened somewhat.
- Heavy drinking rates, hard liquor consumption, and drunken driving fatalities are declining.
- New drugs are shrinking our tumors and enlarging our sexual potency.

And would any of us really wish to have braved the family life of a century ago? Without indoor plumbing? With less electricity generated each year than we now consume in a day? When trivial infections might take a life and when people feared the two leading causes of death—tuberculosis and pneumonia? (From 1900 to the present, life expectancy has risen from forty-seven to seventy-six years.)

In 1999, Joyce and Paul Bowler—a couple with a keen interest in past ways of life—were selected from among 450 applicants to Britain’s Channel 4 network to spend three months with four of their children living the middle-class life of 1900 (which at the time must have seemed like a cuppa tea compared to working-class life). After just a week of rising at 5:30 each morning, preparing food like the Victorians, wearing corsets, shampooing with a mixture of egg, lemon, borax, and camphor, and playing parlor games by gaslight at night, they were “close to calling it quits.” They endured. But lacking a surrounding community of other “Victorian” families, the realities of life in the early 1900s lacked the romantic appeal of *Upstairs Downstairs*.

In *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, Stephanie Coontz reminds us of the way families *really* were.

Children were exploited. In Pennsylvania mines at the turn of the twentieth century, 120,000 children were at work, most of whom started laboring by age eleven. Children were one-fourth of the workers in southern textile mills. Seven-year-olds sometimes worked twelve-hour shifts before falling asleep on the job and being carried to bed unwashed.

Families were often broken—by death. In colonial times, mortality reduced the average length of marriage to a dozen years. Four in ten children lost a parent by age twenty-one. As late as 1940, one in ten children did not live with either parent, more than double today’s one in twenty-five. In 1850, when only 2 percent of the population lived past sixty-five and many people were migrating, few children had ties with their grandparents. Today, “for the first time in history,” notes sociologist Arlene Skolnick, “the average couple has more parents living than it has children. It is also the first era when most of the parent–child relationship takes place after the child becomes an adult.” Before 1900, only four in ten women married, raised children, and enjoyed the empty nest with their spouse—because most women either died before marriage, never married, died before children were born or grown, or were widowed before age fifty.

And consider the poems unwritten, the music never composed, the philosophy never completed, because Keats died at twenty-five, Mozart at thirty-five, Pascal at thirty-nine.

The social safety net had gaping holes. At the beginning of the twentieth century, we had no social security system. Divorced fathers were not obligated to pay child support. One in five children lived in orphanages, often because their impoverished parents could not support them.

Most people had limited educational opportunities. In the bad old days of a century ago, only half of five- to nineteen-year-olds were in school (compared with more than 90 percent today). Only 3.5 percent of eighteen-year-olds were graduating from high school. Today, eight in ten adults have at least a high school education.

Women had restricted opportunities. A half century ago, only one in five Americans approved “of a married woman earning money in business or industry if she has a husband capable of supporting her.” Today, 80 percent approve. Thus, six in ten married women are now in the paid workforce—up from four in ten a half century ago and one in seven a century ago. With greater economic independence, today’s women are more likely to marry for love and less likely to endure abuse out of economic need. America’s married women, whether employed or not, still devote twice as many hours to household tasks as do their husbands. But men’s participation has doubled since 1965, putting them more often in front of the stove, behind the vacuum cleaner, and over the diaper-changing table. Today’s men and women are more likely to share opportunities, responsibilities, and power.

Minorities were shunned. Within the memory of many living individuals, some public accommodations offered “colored” and “white” toilets, those with disabilities were ignored, and gays and lesbians hid from public loathing. If we have not yet achieved “the Great Society,” we have improved upon yesterday’s unjust society.

Ergo, however great our present problems, the past is no golden age to which we would willingly

return if only we could. Yesterday was not the best of times, *today* is the best of times. Seen in the rose-tinted rearview mirror, yesterday may *seem* like a golden age. But even the wholesome 1950s was the decade of McCarthyism, segregation, the Korean War, and air-raid drills and bomb shelters. Golden ages do happen, notes political scientist John Mueller. “But we are never actually *in* them,” because “no matter how much better the present gets, the past gets better faster in reflection.”

In his own golden age of life, my optimistic friend Sir John Templeton is one who does see the present as the best of times. In *Is Progress Speeding Up?* he concludes that things are not only getting better, they are getting better faster than ever, making this “a wonderful time to be alive!”

How true. Yet there is more to the story.

IT IS THE WORST OF TIMES

We are better paid, better fed, better housed, better educated, and healthier than ever before, and with more human rights, faster communication, and more convenient transportation than we have ever known. Ironically, however, for thirty-plus years—from 1960 until the early 1990s—America slid into a deepening social recession that dwarfed the comparatively milder and briefer economic recessions that often dominated our news and politics. Had you fallen asleep in 1960 and awakened in the 1990s, would you—overwhelmed by all the good tidings—feel pleased at the cultural shift? Here are some other facts that would greet you. Since 1960, as we will see,

- The divorce rate has doubled.
- The teen suicide rate has tripled.
- The recorded violent crime rate has quadrupled.
- The prison population has quintupled.
- The percentage of babies born to unmarried parents has (excuse the pun) sextupled.
- Cohabitation (a predictor of future divorce) has increased sevenfold.
- Depression has soared—to ten times the pre-World War II level, by one estimate.

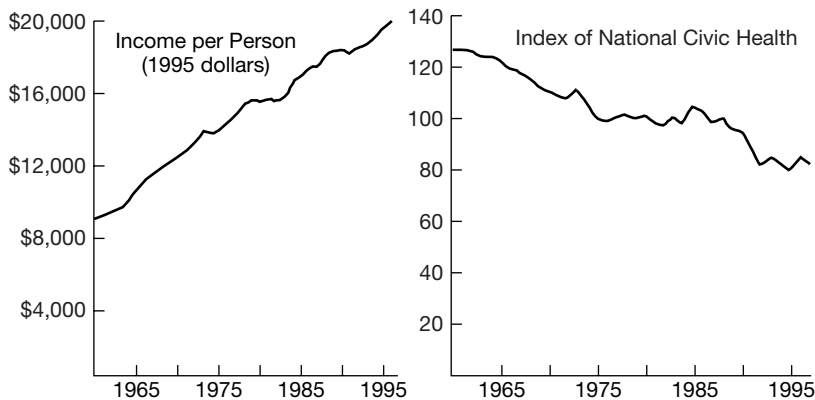


FIGURE 1 The American Paradox

The National Commission on Civic Renewal combined social trends such as these in creating its 1998 “Index of National Civic Health”—which has plunged southward since 1960. Bertrand Russell once said that the mark of a civilized human is the capacity to read a column of numbers and weep. Can we weep for all the crushed lives behind these numbers? It is hard to argue with Al Gore: “The accumulation of material goods is at an all-time high, but so is the number of people who feel an emptiness in their lives.”

At the epicenter of America’s social recession are children and youth. Writing with Elizabeth Gilman, Yale psychologist Edward Zigler, co-founder of Head Start, reported a consensus among researchers: “In the past thirty years of monitoring the indicators of child well-being, never have the indicators looked so negative.” Across America, children are having children and men are fathering children with little commitment to mother or child. In 1960 just over one in ten children did not live with two parents. Today, a third do not. In a recent survey, American Psychological Association members rated “the decline of the nuclear family” as today’s number-one threat to mental health. Urie Bronfenbrenner, a respected developmental psychologist, describes the trends starkly: “The present state of children and families in the United States represents the greatest domestic problem our nation has faced since the founding of the Republic.

It is sapping our very roots.” Speaking to the National Press Club in late 1998, American Psychological Association president Martin Seligman was struck by a “serious paradox”: “Every statistic we have on the ‘objective’ well-being of young Americans is going north. And every statistic we have on their demoralization, on depression, is going in the other direction.”

Facing this cultural erosion, can we—without yearning for an unreal past or squashing basic liberties—expose the corrosive social forces at work and renew our social fabric? And what are the corrosive forces? How is it that things could have gone so well materially and so poorly socially? In other ways, too, these are hardly the best of times, notes Cornell economist Robert Frank in *Luxury Fever*: Americans are spending more hours at work, fewer hours sleeping, and fewer hours with friends and family. “Traffic has grown considerably more congested; savings rates have fallen precipitously; personal bankruptcy filings are at an all-time high; and there is at least a widespread perception that employment security has fallen sharply.”

Radical Individualism

Part of the explanation lies in the radical individualism familiar to us in contemporary America’s pop psychology and libertarian values. Do your own thing. Seek your own bliss. Challenge

authority. If it feels good, do it. Shun conformity. Don't force your values on others. Assert your personal rights (to own guns, sell pornography, do business free of regulations). Protect your privacy. Cut taxes and raise executive pay (personal income takes priority over the common good). To love others, first love yourself. Listen to your own heart. Prefer solo spirituality to communal religion. Be self-sufficient. Expect others likewise to believe in themselves and to make it on their own. Such sentiments define the heart of economic and social individualism, which finds its peak expression in modern America.

The celebration and defense of personal liberty lies at the heart of the old American dream. It drives our free market economy and underlies our respect for the rights of all. In democratic countries that guarantee what Americans consider basic freedoms, people live more happily than in those that don't. Migration patterns testify to this reality. Yet for today's radical individualism, we pay a price: a social recession that imperils children, corrodes civility, and diminishes happiness. When individualism is taken to an extreme, individuals become its ironic casualties.

To cope with the casualties at the base of the social cliffs, we can expand our social ambulance services. Or we can . . . build guardrails at the top. We can dream a new American dream—one that renews our social ecology with values and policies that balance “me thinking” with “we thinking.”

What Is the New American Dream?

To counter radical individualism and cultural corrosion, a new, inclusive social renewal movement is emerging: one that affirms liberals' indictment of the demoralizing effects of poverty and conservatives' indictment of toxic media models; one that welcomes liberals' support for family-friendly workplaces and conservatives' support for committed relationships; one that agrees with liberals' advocacy for children in all sorts of families and conservatives' support for marriage and coparenting. Viewing the contest between liberal and conservative ideas, we can

respond like the Dodo in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: “Everyone has won and all must have prizes!”

Without suppressing our differences do we not—whether self-described liberals or conservatives—share a vision of a better world? Is it not one that rewards initiative but restrains exploitative greed? that balances individual rights with communal well-being? that respects diversity while embracing unifying ideals? that is tolerant of other cultures without being indifferent to moral issues? that protects and heals our degrading physical and social environments? In our utopian social world, adults and children will together enjoy their routines and traditions. They will have close relationships with extended family and with supportive neighbors. Children will live without fear for their safety or the breakup of their families. Fathers and mothers will jointly nurture their children; to say “He fathered the child” will parallel the meaning of “She mothered the child.” Free yet responsible media will entertain us with stories and images that exemplify heroism, compassion, and committed love. Reasonable and rooted moral judgments will motivate compassionate acts and enable noble and satisfying lives.

Mapping the Quest

This dreamed-of world is, as yet, far from our real world. Still facing a large gap between the ideal and real, the advent of the new millennium is a fitting time to confront the reality of America's post-1960 social recession, to identify its roots, and to celebrate the quest for a healthier and happier American culture.

CRITICAL-THINKING QUESTIONS

1. In what sense are we in the United States today living in “the best of times”? In what ways has life been getting worse?
2. What role does “radical individualism” play in these trends?
3. What do you think we might do to improve the social health of the United States? Why?