
Is The American Dream A Reality Or A Myth

Promising a new life full of wealth, happiness and opportunity, the American Dream brought over five million immigrants to the United States in the twentieth century. Through her memoir *Heartland*, author Sarah Smarsh reveals the less publicized perspective by taking the reader on a journey through her childhood, which was full of prejudice, poverty, and struggle. Smarsh recognizes the threats that poverty posed to her family, such as unsafe working environments and abusive relationships. She outlines the patterns which confined each generation before her and how, one by one, each of her family members fell victim to poor education and low-paying jobs, trapping them in a cycle of poverty. Although Smarsh herself is successful in breaking the cycle of extreme poverty in her family, a glimpse into her own background and family history demonstrates that the American Dream is not, at its core attainable.

Originating in 1931, the American Dream promises freedom and opportunity for all in the United States and creates high expectations of American life. James Truslow Adams, who coined the phrase "American Dream," thought that "life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement' regardless of social class or circumstances of birth. Based on individualism, it promises equal opportunity for everyone and even led millions to emigrate from their home countries to pursue the idealistic "white-picket fence" life for which America is most well-known. The United States, whose reputation promises a surplus of jobs, wealth, and a perfect family life, guarantees both immigrants and American parents liberty and security for their children to do and be anything in the 'land of opportunity'.

Despite what Americans are promised, every day they are forced to face the harsh realities of the American Dream and learn that the perfect society may not be achievable. One of the most limiting factors of American life is social class and the restricted class mobility that has existed throughout our country's history. The American Dream promises that no matter your current state, anyone with purpose and work ethic can rise through the ranks and find success; however, the cycle of poverty says otherwise. While a high school diploma itself is free, children whose parents are unable to provide them with a college degree are limited significantly when pursuing career opportunities and will be forced to accept low-paying jobs. These children in turn will face the same struggles as generations before them, and likely start the cycle again. In other words, the prospects of children are dictated by their parents' economic standings, and without being born into a family with money, one simply does not have much social mobility.

This idea that one's success or failure is dictated by the lives of his or her parents is a common theme throughout Smarsh's story and is evidenced in the repeating influences which constrain her family and keep them trapped in the cycle of poverty. One of these patterns is teen

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pregnancy, into which both she and her mother are born. Throughout her memoir, Smarsh acknowledges these pregnancies as a major contributor to her family's poverty by writing to her unborn daughter August and emphasizing that by not giving birth to a child, she saves him or her from becoming a part of this cycle. She talks about her teenage years and how they were a crucial period in her life, as she was determined not to allow a pregnancy to force her into codependency, saying "there are men...whom a woman without economic means will have a harder time escaping". Determined and remarkably clear-minded, she stays on a "warpath of accomplishment" because she carries with her a belief that she "deserves to be seen and heard in a manner no person she knew had ever been". She credits this persistent mindset and her evasion of teenage pregnancy to her grandparents' support.

Another pattern in her family which Smarsh is able to escape is a lifestyle of constant movement and relocation. Because of difficulties and abuse within her marriages, Smarsh's grandmother constantly moves around the country as a young adult, causing Smarsh's mother Jeannie to move nearly fifty times by the time she reaches high school. This lack of stability is another cycle throughout her family's history and is an inhibitor of social and intellectual growth. In order to achieve the elusive American Dream one must obtain an education; however, if one is forced to change schools constantly because of a threat of physical abuse, then a child's education is no longer in his or her control. Smarsh details how her mother often missed opportunities due to switching schools midyear, such as sports tryouts and auditions for school plays and cites this as another reason that her mother remained stuck in a life she had not asked for. If she had not had the option of staying with her grandmother, Smarsh recognizes that she too would have been forced to switch homes and schools each year and would have fallen behind in her own education. Individuals should not have to choose between depriving their children of opportunities and living in a dangerous environment. This reinforces the nonexistence of the American Dream, demonstrating that no matter how hard we work, there are sometimes forces outside of our control which have the ability to set us up for failure.

While it could be argued that by becoming successful and breaking the cycle of her family's poverty, Smarsh proves the existence of the American Dream, her success was not achieved by simply trying harder than the rest of her family. Belief in the American Dream leads to the denial that poverty is a problem and leads many to assume that people who are poor must be lazy — Smarsh's family is anything but. Despite each member of her family facing more challenges due to poverty than many of us can even imagine, each generation manages to keep themselves afloat and provide for their family, which I would consider as success. The reason Smarsh is able to "get out" is not by simply working hard, otherwise every family member before her would have achieved the same thing — in her words, "if you are poor, you are likely to stay poor, no matter how hard you work". She is successful because she grows up observing what poverty does to her family and is able to pinpoint and counteract the series of events which seem to be turning points in her family members' lives.

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Although Smarsh recognizes hard work as a factor of her success, the real message of her story is that belief in yourself and your ability to enact change is what really makes a difference. In her deeply thoughtful memoir, she provides the necessary insight that although there are many aspects of life that are out of our control, acknowledging them is the first step to overcoming them. While it is true that not everyone in America has an equal opportunity for success, the way in which we handle our individual challenges is what sets us apart in the end. The American Dream is misleading — we cannot simply ‘pull ourselves up by our bootstraps;’ grit and hard work lead to success, but alone cannot grant the American Dream.

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