

Student Example: American Myth Essay

I Won't Make More than My Parents and Neither Will You

The crisp air smacked my face as I stood on the dehydrated grass outside my father's childhood home. Marching around the yard in our Steelers apparel, my sisters and I watched as memories flooded back into his mind, eyes lighting up with each story. His father had packed up his family of eight (including the dog), and moved them from their rundown town in Ohio to the promising Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Raised on hard work and determination my father and his siblings knew they had to do everything in their power to acquire what they wanted. Full rides for college proved vital in addition to jobs to cover their other expenses. The idea of making it big somewhere someday to provide a better life for their own families loomed over their heads, some stepping up to the challenge while others fell off somewhere along the way.

My mother coming from a similar background only in the coal town of Clarksburg, West Virginia reminisced on the day she and my dad did what their families had done, but their leap was to New York City. Showing up with no jobs and hardly any money, my mother and father caught a break with jobs practicing as an investment banker and lawyer. Twenty years later this landed them in the suburbs of New Jersey with a beautiful home, a backyard, three kids who had received a great public education and had the opportunity to go anywhere they wanted for college without worrying about the cost. My folks had achieved a staple of the American dream: being more successful than your parents.

As I enter a stage of my life where the future feels closer than ever, my skepticism grows fearing this staple's possibility and relevance fades with each passing year. The notion that the "normal course" is still to do better financially than your parents or previous generations is a myth. Researchers whose backgrounds ranged from economics to sociology estimated "that only half the children born in the 1980s grew up to earn more than their parents did, after adjusting for

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inflation. That's a drop from 92 percent of children born in 1940" (Tankersley). Although relevant for all Americans, the decline in upward mobility appears most prominent among the middle class. The growing wage gap between the unskilled worker and the high ranked executive has created an uneven distribution allowing for intergenerational advancement rates to diminish. Why?

J.D. Vance tells us in his autobiography this gap stems from the cultural detachment of low-skilled, working class, small town middle America. He explains that "nothing united [them] with the core fabric of American society" as the failure to find a steady wage grew the cynicism that would later cause him to become an outsider in his hometown. Believing his outlook that working hard would pay off he left the U.S. Marine Corps to attend Ohio State graduating in two years while working multiple jobs to eventually attend the esteemed Yale Law School. But Vance is not the rule- he is the exception. He left behind a town who viewed the 'system' with such skepticism they fail in even attempting to get ahead because of their mindset of the difficulty in doing so.

Vance's story resonated with me, for my parents proven exceptionalism aligned with his as I return to their hometowns to see those left behind. However, to place the entirety of the problem on an outlook would be ignoring the complexity of the issue. With housing, healthcare and the cost of college rising at a higher rate than wages "this tripartite gap, in particular, may well be what has convinced many younger Americans that they won't ever reach one critical milestone in the Great American Journey—living better than their parents did" (Staff). The living standards of ordinary American workers has become difficult to sustain as outsourcing only adds to the failure of keeping up with inflation. As jobs are lost to cheap laborers overseas and technological advancements with third party services the research has suggested that these

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practices “[have] played a significant role in the nations troubling trends of stagnating wages and rising inequality” (Lee). How does America balance the difference in rising and lowering tides if the faith within the government seems to already be lost?

As a twenty-year old college student, I and my three other roommates scrape together \$5,000 a month for a small place in our little college town, a price that seems more suitable for a decent apartment in a big city. Rents are rising, the middle class is thinning and we are still worried with how to make more money while spending less to accomplish the ultimate feat. With an obscene amount of pessimism, a technological world, and a lack of faith in the government’s ability to fix it, the ability to do better than our parents seems more of a nightmare than a dream. But is it an end all be all?

The saying money can’t buy happiness comes to mind as I close out this essay. While it’s true money and financial stability alleviate many of the stresses that accompany life, the fact remains that fulfilment might not pay well. Doing better than your parents and pursuing your passion may not go hand in hand. My dream of playing a key role in curing brain cancer as an academic researcher does not coincide with the American dream, because my paycheck won’t beat out an investment banker or an executive businessman. And that’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make.

Citations

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