Isabel Forward

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Fourth Hour

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Week Seven:

The American Dream

I have always been fascinated by stories.

I grew up reading my way through the small library at my elementary school, hanging onto every opening sentence and cliffhanger ending. I listened to stories on the news, from my friends, in history class, and at home, and I became invested in the lives of the characters I met along the way.

After a while, the same stories began to draw me in - the stories of the triumphant underdog, of a character who transitions from a life of rags to a life of riches. I heard this story so much in school that I began to believe it: we all have the same opportunity to achieve success. If we work hard, there is no reason we should not overcome any obstacle.

This is the tale of social mobility, of meritocracy, of the American Dream. This is a tale we have been telling for years, in our history books and in our story books and in the values we instill in our children. Work hard and receive rewards.

Like me, Americans have become fascinated, and even personally invested, in the story of a once disadvantaged person who finds success. However, this story also asserts that these people who are like our protagonist, but have failed to lift themselves from an impoverished state - are in this disadvantaged place because they failed to work hard. This rags to riches story provides hope for the disadvantaged, but simultaneously asserts that poverty results from a lack of trying. This is the “prosperity gospel”: if you are doing well, you deserve to prosper and, if you are not doing well, that outcome is of your own fault.

I must admit that I find comfort in the idea that anyone’s voice can change the world, that everyone has the ability to create the life they want for themselves. Even further, this story makes me feel validated. I like the idea of having deserved a life with the privilege of higher education, a life with the comfort of growing up with only worries about my homework and my next application deadline.

However, I’ve realized that this story is just that: a story, a yarn that perpetuates the myth that all can defy the stacked odds against them. Racial background, socioeconomic status, family structure, and privilege all play a much greater role in this rags to riches story than the authors of the American story let on. I have grown tired of hearing, seeing, and sometimes, believing, the same story of the underdog always winning, of a self-made man, of white privilege, all disguised as hard work, with no room in that narrative for inherited privilege and luck.

An integral part of my story is my privilege. I’ve learned to recognize that the American Dream has been delicately placed into my hands. My access to private school, the lack of social boundaries I face, and the people who have the time to pick me up when I fall short all ease my way into a life full of opportunity. When I have been told that I can do anything, I haven’t had any reason not to believe it.

Seven years ago, I sat in a classroom much like the young boy I work with at my service site. In the sixth grade, we would have both have recently transferred to a new school. We both face difficulties as children who are painfully shy. We both have siblings we describe as both good and evil, depending on the day. However, unlike me, José is learning English as his second language. The additional assistance my parents gave me allowed me to do well in my classes, while his single mother works full-time. The lack of funding in José’s Norristown public school eliminated many after school programs that could possibly provide the assistance he needs as a transfer student from Mexico. While he attends CCATE, a free after school program for English Language Learners and their families, the three hours a week does not eliminate the other systemic barriers he faces. All of these academic disadvantages do not begin to touch upon the discrimination as nd stereotyping he faces outside of the classroom as a Latino male who speaks little English.

José is a smart young boy and has little inherent difference from me when I was his age. However, because the school does not cater to students like José, his teachers label him as a “problem child,” while I have been allowed to succeed academically with relative ease. José and I are unfairly judged by the same standards when our situations have set us up for the pursuit of this American Dream very differently. My entire life, I have been told that I am accepted, deserving, and ready to pursue this American Dream. I believed it, and this belief in my potential has driven me to where I am today. The resources José has been afforded and the treatment he has received send him the message that he is undeserving - that when we advertise the American Dream, we are not advertising to him. When José fails to receive the academic assistance he needs, when he attends a school where the class size is so big that the teacher cannot recognize when he cannot understand English or read, when teachers and administrators cite his existence as problematic, we, as a society, devalue his existence. And while I hope that those constant and unrelenting messages have not diminished his ever-growing desire to learn, when he tells me that he will never read, or when he refuses to bring in his homework (as he shamefully avoids showing me the poor grades that teachers tell me he has received) I receive the impression that he has grown to believe them, and consequently, not belief in himself.

Often, it’s easy to feel guilty or ashamed upon recognizing that all opportunities are not solely due to personal merit, but to generations of societal structures, like access to healthcare, to voting, and to a quality education, that have worked to favor few. However, admitting that some people face fewer systematic disadvantages than others is the first step to breaking down the stereotypes we create regarding racial and ethnic groups, mental illness, homelessness, and poverty.

This story we have become so fascinated with depicts an ideal reality - that the desire to work hard directly results in success. However, in order to work toward this ideal reality on a societal level, we must first admit that the story of the American Dream is not a reality for everyone. And most importantly, we must ask the questions: Whose stories do we, as a society, decide to tell or to listen to? Whom do these stories benefit? And whom do they harm?