



American Dreams

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There is not a guarantee in the world. Oh your needs are guaranteed, your needs are absolutely guaranteed by the most stringent of warranties, in the plainest, truest words: knock; seek; ask. But you must read the fine print. “Not as the world giveth, give I unto you.” That’s the catch. If you catch it it will catch you up, aloft, up to any gap at all, and you’ll come back, for you will come back, transformed in a way you may not have bargained for – dribbling and crazed.¹

-Annie Dillard

When I first read this I thought, “This either the most terrifying philosophy I have heard, or some of the most comforting.” The notion “there is not a guarantee in the world.” That is worrisome. But it’s true. I have seen it. You have seen it. We have all seen it. “Not as the world giveth, give I unto you.” Well, maybe that is a good thing? The world can be hard, maybe it’s good that something else gives differently. OK, then here comes the hard part.

Could we have some control with all of this? Do we really have to fall out of the airplane as Dillard suggests, and say “thank you.” Can we please have some control? Oh, we are not to say please. OK, can we just get to the part where we are monks with coals that neither burn nor warm? No short cut to that. Rats.

The monk knows precisely how vulnerable he is and will not live among death forgetting men. That’s the secret to living with the coal that neither burns

¹ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), 269.

nor warms. We are to sit at the edge of the tiger's cave and know exactly where we are. Rats. Can we go home yet?

Sadly, I am home. We are all home. This is home. But this home feels like a very bad American dream right now. Talk of nationalization, record unemployment rates, stress tests on banks (what's to find? There's stress!!). It's just not completely working right. I put my money in the market every month, same time, same amount and I wonder "Who are the people who make the market go up and down 500 points in one day?" It's not me. Could we have some control with all of this? Let's all go swear and yell at Annie Dillard until she writes something different. Yea, we will make her take back her frightening words.

The trouble is I think she is on to something, really on to something, and this is a good thing. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is a simple philosophical classic about life and how, in the midst of no guarantees, to suck the marrow out of life with verve and lust. Dillard just doesn't sugar coat the entirety of life for ease.

For Dillard, the truth will set us free. And so she explains

The universe was not made in jest but in solemn incomprehensible earnest. By a power that is unfathomably secret, and holy, and fleet. There is nothing to be done about, but ignore it or see it. And then you can walk fearlessly, eating what you must, growing wherever you can, like the monk on the road who knows precisely how vulnerable he is, who takes no comfort among death-forgetting men, and who carries his vision of vastness and might around in his tunic like a live coal which neither burns nor warms him, but with which he will not part.²

Wow. There are no guarantees. There is suffering and pain and joy and accomplishment so make whoopee and raise Cain and Lazarus when you can. And the bad things are not a punishment. Nothing is that personal. It is the reality of no guarantees. Life is really that random and at times, unfair. I suspect many of us have shed bitter tears over this reality this year, and we are and will be transformed and we will be OK. The truth hurts. But what is good is, and still will be, good.

We were dreaming that the wrong things were good, by the way. That is part of our pain today. As Americans, one of our problems is that we started to believe that what we saw on television was real. Television is not the source of pain. It doesn't have that much power. But we, as human, chose to believe what we saw there, and in magazines and the movies, that material created to mostly divert us, was real. We have lived for several decades without the truth, and it hurts.

² Ibid., 270.

My son likes the Disney show *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* which has been on for several years. The characters Zack and Cody live with their mother (what does she do for work or money? I have no idea – it’s never shown) in an expensive hotel suite in Boston. I sat my son down one day and explained to him how expensive that would be and how few people could afford to do this. I told him that what he was watching on television, though funny, was neither real nor average. And if we stayed at this hotel for two nights (given Boston prices), I would use the cost of my entire month’s rent on a two night stay.

The most recent Census Bureau statistics I looked at indicated that the median annual household income in the United States is just over \$50,000 (half the households are above this number and half of the households are below this number).³ A household making \$87,500 + a year is in the top 25% income bracket in the United States.⁴ But think of it, \$87,500 is a big salary for one person. It’s not so big for two people (depending on where they live), or a couple with three children who need day care, braces and college educations, or a family with significant health problems or supporting an elderly parent. \$87,500 a year is a lot of money, and it might never buy us into a \$300,000 home, a second home, designer clothes, luxury cars, and for certain not the “suite life.”

We see these financial distortions everywhere. We are not characters on *Friends* (how did they afford apartments that large in New York City?), *Sex in the City* (how does a columnist afford all those clothes?), *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, or *Entourage*. At some point in the late 1970’s television financially spun out of reality, right around the time that *Fantasy Island* appeared. This is also the same time that greater economic disparity grew in America, so that the top 25% made a larger percentage, than ever before, from the bottom 25%.

Before that we had a brief window of realism, with shows like *Good Times* and *Archie Bunker*. Think about *Good Times*, a show that took place in the projects. The theme song mentions lay-offs and credit rip-offs and the show highlighted resilience and family in the midst of financial struggle. What modern show do we have equivalent to that?

Then think about the introduction of *Fantasy Island*, *The Love Boat* and *Charlie’s Angels*, escapist one hour drams that financially upped the ante on “successful living.” Believe me, I watched them all. But as the rich got richer in America and the poor got poorer, we watched the rich and dreamed it was real.

We also dreamed that money equated value. We turned a blind eye to a system that favors education as the road to wealth, which of course is not a miracle equalizer. We live in a state with an unconstitutional funding system for public

³ U.S. Census Bureau Annual Social and Economic Supplement, *Selected Characteristics of Households, by Total Money Income in 2007*.

⁴ Ibid.

education, property tax. Money stays in schools in wealthy areas. Better schools have more resources and better teachers and send kids to college where they graduate and earn more money. Education is the marker used to determine “class” in America. And schools in poorer school districts, well, they have higher drop out rates, and less students go to college, and the kids from these schools earn less money someday, and it all starts over again.

I understand that most of us value education and want to live in a school district that delivers this promise. I do. I understand why we move to live in these districts. I just hope we don’t do this with belief that it is fair or that people with less money and education are somehow less valuable, less intelligent, or worthless. It would be like living a death-forgetting dream about the diversity and beauty of humanity.

It is so easy when unable to pay for higher education, or losing a job, or filing for bankruptcy to feel valueless. My friends, this is a bold face lie and I hope you do not believe it, and have learned the truth in the midst of your tears this past year. No one is or ever will be the sum of their education, bank account, household income, employment, or pension. This is such a finite scale, so punitive and small. Money lacks vastness and might.

Society makes life harder for those with less money, there is no doubt about that. But we are not the sum of this financial discrimination and oppression. This valuation is based on a dream gone bad, that money equated meaning and human value. The monk who knows precisely how vulnerable he is, is aware of both the need for, illusion of, and lack of guarantee about money.

Last week I asked my neighbor for her idea of an American dream. She told me that in her dream, there is not a pie with diminishing pieces. Instead, there is something for everybody. I told her she was a socialist, and that I loved her dream. She told me that this is what she teaches her children, that there is something for everybody rather than missing pie pieces. She told me that this is not reality, but a mentality, a choice she wants her children to learn to make, to see abundance instead of scarcity, to find abundance in many places (most not involving money). And even more, she believes that “to whom much is given (whether that be family, love, home, food, education, money, safety, and/or laughter), much is expected.” I want to spend more time with her. I think she has her eyes on the prize and says “thank you” even while falling out the airplane.

A colleague recently told me that he had a dream too. Knowing I was soon to preach a sermon on American dreams, I asked him to tell me his dream. He explained, “In my dream I am driving along a deserted stretch of highway when all of a sudden I come across a capsized rig. No one is around. I approach the rig and discover that inside it is full of Prozac (a medication used to treat depression and

other conditions). I then take this Prozac, and put it in the central water system so that everyone calms down.”

His dream made me laugh and laugh. Yes, I think we would all be better off if we calmed down. We would still have all our problems, but maybe we could manage them more creatively, patiently, and flexibly as team members instead of combatants (it’s pretty frustrating when the bank won’t talk to you when you need and want to refinance that mortgage). Maybe we would start to see hope in unexpected places and live some abundance instead of only seeing scarcity.

Some of us are being disproportionately affected by losses today. Some of us just feel any loss strongly. Whatever your story, if you feel overwhelmed by pain or anxiety I hope you will talk to your friends and family, do things you enjoy, visit your doctor, talk to a therapist, and try not to displace your anxiety where it doesn’t belong (being hard on yourself, or other people, making destructive decisions, etc.). Taking good care of yourself and working positively with others is a choice. Seeing abundance is a choice. It’s harder now when there is more pain to bear, but it is still a choice within the control of each of us.

The writer, therapist, and concentration camp survivor Victor Frankl wrote “the last of the human freedoms is to choose one’s attitudes.” He’s right, you know. We still get to choose whether to write a letter of complaint or laugh, whether to believe the worst or the best, whether to judge or have compassion, whether to despair or hope. There is lots of displaced anxiety floating amongst us right now. We still get to choose what to keep and what to pass, what helps and what harms.

Annie Dillard writes

There is always an enormous temptation in all of life to diddle around making itsy-bitsy friends and meals and journeys for itsy-bitsy years on end. It is so self-conscious, so apparently moral, simply to step aside from the gaps where the creeks and winds pour down, saying, I never merited this grace, quite rightly, and then to sulk along the rest of your days on the edge of rage.”⁵

Dillard is very bold. She says she “won’t have it.” “We are making hay when we should be making whoopee; we are raising tomatoes when we should be raising Cain, or Lazarus. Dillard champions relevance. I admire her boldness. She says the gaps are the thing. “Go into the gaps.” She scares me with her raw courage. But go, I think we should.

⁵ Dillard, 268.

Go into that gap of wilderness. Walk right in and look around, holding a hand if need be. What is fueling you? What fuels you? What feeds you? What do you see? What do you want to see? Who are you? What do you want to choose? “The gaps are the thing. The gaps are the spirit’s one home, the altitudes and latitudes so dazzlingly spare and clean that the spirit can discover itself for the first time like a once-blind man unbound.”

In my American dream we keep our eyes on the prize, find abundance, and try to help one another. In my American dream we have the courage to enter the gaps and see like a once-blind man now unbound. We know we are falling out of the airplane and instead of swearing, lamenting, pleading or despairing we say “thank you.” “Thank you.” There are no guarantees and still we say “thank you,” spending the afternoon, really spending the gift of time.

For some of us this is a really hard time for joy, leisure, kindness, or laughter, but in all honesty, all honesty, things will improve over time, and many things are still good, if not great. In the absence of Prozac invading the metropolitan Cincinnati water supply, knowing we are in a recession, we have pain, and that life is rare and precious, with special gifts, I hope we dream about abundance, not scarcity, and how to share this abundant dream with others.