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The American Paradox

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# The American Paradox

*Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*

DAVID G. MYERS

*Foreword by Martin E. Marty*

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*For tomorrow's The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty children*

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## Foreword

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A first reading of *The American Paradox* may lead some readers—as it led me—to think, now and then, “Why don’t Americans make up their minds?” Behind that there might even be another thought: “Why doesn’t David Myers make up his mind?” If Americans and author Myers would simply and clearly have done that, the picture presented here would be more consistent than it appears to be. And the task of Professor Myers would have been simpler.

The story of how Americans live is, however, to say the least, mixed. Or as Myers so appropriately condenses it in his title, it is paradoxical.

If Americans were always, only, and simply materialistic and greedy, or if *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* Myers chose to view them as such, the plot of this book could be simpler. It would make headlines. Plenty of analysts who go looking for the spiritual dimension in America and Americans’ lives do skew the evidence, hide some of it, and then mount soapboxes to denounce everything that goes on in the nation as “bad faith.” *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* Such analysts usually call themselves prophets, or at least the dust jackets of their books claim that they are prophetic. To borrow from a recent book title, the headline seekers see all Americans except themselves as slouching toward Gomorrah.

Opposing the carpers are their opposite numbers, the positive thinkers, the optimists who see only the sunny side of life. They look at the same piles of evidence as do their counterparts and, also hiding some of it, proclaim that by their own standards all is well and all will be well. Such authors do not believe in dragging us through swamps of statistics and sloughs of moral despond; they will not let our true darkneses be seen as anything more than passing clouds. In the counsels of the optimists, we can trust churchgoing, book-buying, family-loving America to be spiritual.

The author before us, however, is not denunciatory, crabby, or, in those terms, prophetic. Neither is he a positive thinker, an *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* optimist, someone who obscures from our view the heights of American exploitation or the depths of national miseries.

Given his approach, then, expect in each chapter to get an up-to-date, honest, accurate, and fair-minded presentation of a host of indicators that all is not well. Then, when he has let us glimpse the slouchers and the sloughs, Myers says, in effect, “but on the other hand . . .” and presents apparently contradictory testimony with which we have to reckon. The parts of each chapter appear in a kind of categorical and logical sequence. Yet at the end of the chapter we readers have been forced to deal with an interplay, no elements of which make full sense *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* in isolation from their opposites.

Hence, Americans live their lives in *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* paradoxical ways.

What impressed me, as a fifty-year chronicler of some of these American ways—I “do” religion and culture, not sex and violence—is how the data and disclosures about ways of life differ from

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those of, say, 1950. And yet, paradoxically, one can also observe how much continuity there is, at least in the concerns and the choice of items that cry out for measurement and that tease us into responding to ever more encompassing questions.

Myers is a *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* social scientist, not a formal philosopher or a systematic theologian. But he does not let social sciences pull him into mere positivisms. He is a hoper, but he never lets his inclination toward hope obscure his mission as a social scientist. And after dealing with the paradoxes in his finely nuanced way, he does tilt his hand a bit and we get some glimpses of what he thinks are elements of a better society, and glances at some means he sees of producing them.

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## Preface

While writing psychology textbooks I sometimes come across information so interesting and so humanly significant that I just can't keep it to myself. Such feelings emerged as I tracked breathtaking cultural changes that have occurred over our past four decades—a mere eye-blink of time to any historian. Among my observations: From 1960 to about 1993 we were soaring economically, especially at the upper levels, and sinking socially. To an extension of Ronald Reagan's famous question, "Are we better off than we were 40 years ago?" our honest answer would have been, materially yes, morally no.

Therein lies the American paradox. We now have, as average Americans, doubled real incomes and double what money buys. We have espresso coffee, the World Wide Web, sport utility vehicles, and caller ID. And we have less happiness, more depression, more fragile relationships, less communal commitment, less vocational security, more crime (even after the recent decline), and more demoralized children.

People are noticing. Seventy-six percent of Americans responding to a late 1998 *Washington Post*/Kaiser Foundation/Harvard University poll agreed that the country's "values and moral beliefs... have gotten pretty seriously off on the wrong track"; only 21 percent see them as "generally going in the right direction." What do you think? "Compared to 20 years ago, do you think it is harder or not harder to raise kids to be *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* good people today?" If you are like 89 percent of Americans responding to this 1998 Gallup survey question, you think it is harder. And if you are like most Americans (when reflecting on the nation's problems for a 1999 Gallup survey), you no longer say "it's the economy, stupid"; you now see *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* "moral problems" as the larger concern. Political leaders of both parties are sensing our desire to move beyond increasing material prosperity to build, in Al Gore's words, "an America that is

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not only better off but better.”

Here, it seemed to me, was profoundly important information for our national dialogue as we enter the new millennium. We cannot dodge the questions: What is the state of our culture? How are recent social trends impacting our well-being? Without trampling on our liberties, how might we reform our social ecology? What can we celebrate? What should we change?

## **Getting the Big Picture**

As a research psychologist and writer, I am keen to inform the mind while arousing the heart. I therefore began this book not wanting to offer social commentary that was merely my own opinion. Instead I wanted to share some of the surprising—and sometimes not so surprising—findings that shed light on the roots and fruits of cultural changes. Thus I wondered: by wedding scholarship with journalism, could I offer a compelling synopsis of America’s social recession and of the social renewal movement that, happily, is now under way?

Other authors have focused on certain specifics: the sexual revolution, the decline of marriage and father care, the state of the nation’s children, violence trends, media influences, character education, and the social consequences of faith. While I’ll be drawing more extensively on psychology, my ambitious aim is to build bridges between their efforts, to connect the dots, to offer a “big picture” overview of late 20th century social trends—including the harbingers of social renewal.

Our culture’s prospects for renewal are indeed brightening. We have seen a groundswell of public concern in the late 1990s, visible not only in the Million Man March, Promise Keepers’ rallies, and public opinion polls but also in the discovery of common ground shared by many liberals and conservatives. Despite culture wars over gay rights, abortion, taxation, national defense, and Bill Clinton’s behavior, there is shared concern for the social ecology that nurtures children and youth. The dialogue about American values has shifted from expanding personal rights to enhancing communal civility, from raising self-esteem to rousing social responsibility, from “whose values?” to “our values.” The supporting voices range from Jesse Jackson to James Dobson, from Hillary Rodham Clinton to Charles Colson, and from Donna Shalala to William Bennett. E. J. Dionne, Jr., captures the optimistic mood: “The United States is on the verge of a new era of reform similar in spirit to the social rebuilding that took place during the Progressive Era.... Rekindling a spirit of social reconstruction is both essential and a realistic hope.”

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## A Psychological Science Perspective

So what is my peculiar take on all this? My perspective is not overtly political or ideological. My vocation, as one who distills psychological science for various audiences, is to pull together the emerging research and reflect on its human significance. As I report findings and draw conclusions, readers may at times feel irritated by this book's seemingly The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty "liberal" or "conservative" slant. I resist such labels. If it is "liberal" to report the toxic consequences of materialism, economic individualism, and income inequality, then the liberalism is in the data I report. If it is "conservative" to report that sexual fidelity, co-parenting, positive media, and faith help create a social ecology that nurtures healthy children and communities, then the conservatism resides in the findings.

My concern, then, is less with whether I am being a good liberal or conservative than with assembling an accurate picture of reality. In doing so, I rely much less on compelling stories than on research findings. As an experimental social psychologist—one who studies how people view, affect, and relate to one another—I'm not The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty much persuaded by anecdotes, testimonials, or inspirational pronouncements. When forming opinions about the social world, I tell people, beware those who tell heart-rending but atypical stories. With apologies to Mark Twain, there are three kinds of lies—lies, damned lies, and vivid but misleading anecdotes. One can marshal dramatic stories to support any contention, or its opposite. The truth of human experience, I believe, is better discerned by surveys that faithfully represent the population and control for complicating factors, and by careful experiments.

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