Waking Up from the American Dream

Why Americans are increasingly discontentwith their lives.

By [Barry Schwartz](http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/authors/barry-schwartz), published on July 01, 2000

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times .... " So begins Charles Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities, and so begins David G. Myers' important book, The American Paradox.

What is the paradox? Simply put, it is this: As Americans have grown richer, they have grown less content with their lives. No society in the history of the world has ever enjoyed the standard of living Americans know today: Incomes are up, prices are stable, unemployment is down, life expectancy is rising; we enjoy more freedom and opportunity than ever before. Even America's poor live well by world standards and by the standards of history. Yet since 1960, the [divorce](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/divorce) rate has doubled, teen[suicide](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/suicide) has tripled, violent crime has quadrupled, the prison population has quintupled, and some estimates put the incidence of depression in the year 2000 at ten times what it was in the year 1900. Americans are less happy today than they were 40 years ago, despite the fact that they make 2.5 times as much money. Myers' book documents this paradox in eloquent and stunning detail.

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How did we get into this mess? Myers pins the blame principally on rampant individualism, fed by a commercial culture that encourages[materialism](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/consumer-behavior) and a national media circus that makes the worst of human behavior look normal. (His chapter on the media is a relentless and savage critique of an industry he says has abandoned any shred of social responsibility in its pursuit of profit while hiding behind the First Amendment.) To undo the damage, Myers argues for a return to "[moral](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/morality)[education](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/education)" (he dispenses with the myth of value-free education), and a rekindling of [religious](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/religion) faith and practice. What de Tocqueville asserted after he toured the United States almost 200 years ago, Myers supports with facts: Religion is good for us.

It is hard not to be persuaded both by Myers' description of the problems we face and by his recommendations for solutions. I know that I am. Yet I think Myers neglects the most important piece of the puzzle: He attacks materialism, but doesn't ask why people are materialistic. Could it be because Americans have learned that they can't count on anyone but themselves to provide things like health care and education for their families? Myers appeals to the media to do the right thing, and asks companies to adopt "family-friendly" policies. But why would they do so when their only responsibility is to improve the profits of their stockholders? It seems to me that there is a causal relationship between the policies that have made us affluent and our growing unhappiness. In our pursuit of wealth, we have removed constraints on businesses and allowed the social safety net to erode. The ideology of the free market is one of individualism, materialism and freedom from constraint, and this ideology infects everything it touches.

We must acknowledge the many ways in which the free market erodes much of what is good about our [social life](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/social-life). The price we pay for unmitigated freedom in the market is the neglect and decay of almost all the social virtues that make life worth living. The free market may make us richer, but it costs us the intimacy, commitment, caring, fairness and loyalty that make us happy. It fills our bellies, but leaves us spiritually hungry.

Conservative social critics such as William Bennett and George Will condemn our culture for its loss of moral substance while at the same time celebrating a political system that gives a free hand to the market. The truth is that economic liberalism and cultural conservatism are inherently incompatible and self-defeating. For the sake of our future well-being and the well-being of coming generations, we can't let them get away with this nonsense any longer. Americans would do well to read Myers' book and use his evidence as a weapon against virtue's deadliest enemy--the free market.

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