

Five Lies Our Culture Tells

The cultural roots of our political problems.

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Four years ago, in the midst of the Obama presidency, I published a book called [“The Road to Character.”](#) American culture seemed to be in decent shape and my focus was on how individuals can deepen their inner lives. This week, in the midst of the Trump presidency, I’ve got another book, [“The Second Mountain.”](#) It’s become clear in the interim that things are *not* in good shape, that our problems are societal. The whole country is going through some sort of spiritual and emotional crisis.

College mental health facilities are swamped, suicide rates are spiking, the president’s repulsive behavior is tolerated or even celebrated by tens of millions of Americans. At the root of it all is the following problem: We’ve created a culture based on lies.

Here are some of them:

Career success is fulfilling. This is the lie we foist on the young. In their tender years we put the most privileged of them inside a college admissions process that puts achievement and status anxiety at the center of their lives. That begins advertising’s lifelong mantra — if you make it, life will be good.

Everybody who has actually tasted success can tell you that’s not true. I remember when the editor of my first book called to tell me it had made the best-seller list. It felt like ... nothing. It was external to me.

The truth is, success spares you from the shame you might experience if you feel yourself a failure, but career success alone does not provide positive peace or fulfillment. If you build your life around it, your ambitions will always race out in front of what you’ve achieved, leaving you anxious and dissatisfied.

I can make myself happy. This is the lie of self-sufficiency. This is the lie that happiness is an individual accomplishment. If I can have just one more victory, lose 15 pounds or get better at meditation, then I will be happy.

But people looking back on their lives from their deathbeds tell us that happiness is found amid thick and loving relationships. It is found by defeating self-sufficiency for a state of mutual dependence. It is found in the giving and receiving of care.

It’s easy to say you live for relationships, but it’s very hard to do. It’s hard to see other people in all their complexity. It’s hard to communicate from your depths, not your shallows. It’s hard to stop performing! No one teaches us these skills.

Life is an individual journey. This is the lie books like Dr. Seuss' "[Oh, the Places You'll Go](#)" tell. In adulthood, each person goes on a personal trip and racks up a bunch of experiences, and whoever has the most experiences wins. This lie encourages people to believe freedom is the absence of restraint. Be unattached. Stay on the move. Keep your options open.

In reality, the people who live best tie themselves down. They don't ask: What cool thing can I do next? They ask: What is my responsibility here? They respond to some problem or get called out of themselves by a deep love.

By planting themselves in one neighborhood, one organization or one mission, they earn trust. They have the freedom to make a lasting difference. It's the chains we choose that set us free.

You have to find your own truth. This is the privatization of meaning. It's not up to the schools to teach a coherent set of moral values, or a society. Everybody chooses his or her own values. Come up with your own answers to life's ultimate questions! You do you!

The problem is that unless your name is Aristotle, you probably can't do it. Most of us wind up with a few vague moral feelings but no moral clarity or sense of purpose.

The reality is that values are created and passed down by strong, self-confident communities and institutions. People absorb their values by submitting to communities and institutions and taking part in the conversations that take place within them. It's a group process.

Rich and successful people are worth more than poorer and less successful people. We pretend we don't tell this lie, but our whole meritocracy points to it. In fact, the meritocracy contains a skein of lies.

The message of the meritocracy is that you are what you accomplish. The false promise of the meritocracy is that you can earn dignity by attaching yourself to prestigious brands. The emotion of the meritocracy is conditional love — that if you perform well, people will love you.

The sociology of the meritocracy is that society is organized around a set of inner rings with the high achievers inside and everyone else further out. The anthropology of the meritocracy is that you are not a soul to be saved but a set of skills to be maximized.

No wonder it's so hard to be a young adult today. No wonder our society is fragmenting. We've taken the lies of hyper-individualism and we've made them the unspoken assumptions that govern how we live.

We talk a lot about the political revolution we need. The cultural revolution is more important.