

Stop Relying on Amnesia: Re-integrating Your Past for Intrinsic Growth

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Many Americans today tend to devalue accumulated life experiences and over time come to see them as baggage to be disregarded and discarded. The illusion of “unlimited potential,” regardless of background, is bestowed upon all by the American Dream, which ingrains into each American mind the possibility of self-made success. Contrarily, F. Scott Fitzgerald projects the impossibility of such drastic social changes in his classic novel *The Great Gatsby*. Marc Freedman of the Harvard Business Review refers to the American Dream as a “reinvention fantasy” which is both “unrealistic and misleading” for most of its admirers, explaining that true growth relies on both past knowledge and forethought. What I, Fitzgerald, and Freedman fear is that the trope of the American Dream instills impractical hopes of skyrocketing growth by setting the expectation that anything is possible. Instead, we need to shift the narrative away from presupposed success and strengthen our relationship with our past rather than forsake it; we need to carve a new path through re-integration and adaptation.

Fitzgerald uses *The Great Gatsby* as a mythological narrative to warn Americans of the “I can do anything myself” mindset by criticizing Gatsby’s singular obsession with reinventing his identity--his means of infiltrating the exclusive highest class of the Roaring Twenties. Fitzgerald ensures first that the reader is dazzled by Gatsby’s gilded lifestyle before breaking apart the facade and revealing its shortcomings. The extravagance of Gatsby’s well-attended parties (Fitzgerald 40) loses its appeal when the reader learns that his wealth comes from an extensive history of crime (Fitzgerald 70), and his credibility is further undermined by his starkly contrasting “unsuccessful” background as a “clam-digger” and a “salmon-fisher” (Fitzgerald 98). When Gatsby’s funeral attracts no sympathizers, attended by a measly “procession of three cars” (Fitzgerald 174), the realization dawns on Nick that Jay Gatsby’s entire life was lived without meaningful connections to anyone or anything but money. Gatsby falls victim to a fatal herd mentality by blindly expecting a natural integration into the higher class as a result of his prestigious, wealthy appearance. Fitzgerald grounds this “false hope” in the context of the 1920s, a period of significant economic growth that caught many lower- and middle-class families in the same myopic search for upper-class luxury. With Jay Gatsby acting as a singular archetype, *The Great Gatsby* ultimately cautions that the untamed desires unleashed by the American Dream are not sufficient or necessary for real growth.

If this warning renders you hopeless right now, you might be looking at this issue through the lens of the American Dream. Studying the success stories of “social innovators” that underwent radical change in the second halves of their lives, Marc Freedman of the Harvard Business Review claims that life potential can be tied to life experience in a nurturing fashion instead of the limiting fashion that Fitzgerald and the American Dream would have you believe. Freedman describes this conflict as one between “reintegration” and “reinvention,” asserting the importance of embracing your past rather than forsaking it to foster new growth. Preserving old skillsets affirms the value of each success and failure in our lives, and integrating them into new contexts can be as rewarding as it is efficient. Throughout the article, Freedman refers to the “transformative success story” of a man, Gary Maxworthy, who transcended from a typical employee to a humanitarian worker with a broad impact. His youthful aspiration to “join the Peace Corps” was chained down by the weight of practicality: he ended up working in the food

distribution industry in order to support his family. Hindsight reveals that this allowed him to realize his original humanitarian goal by building upon decades of career experience and knowledge, and he developed an unprecedented system that relocated millions of pounds of wasted, farm-fresh food to the people in need lining up at the California food banks.

Maxworthy's capacity for innovation was expanded through his industry experience, and without his food-distribution knowledge, he very well could have been just another grunt—he'd be looked back upon as a statistic instead of a paragraph. Such would be in line with the American Dream, the "future liberated from the past," that our 300-million-plus citizens collectively idolize. To combat America's delusional preoccupation with "rebirth," Freedman prescribes the imperative to "draw on our accumulated knowledge" and to "appreciate the true value of experience" in forging ahead on new paths.

It seems that inherent in "self-reinvention," in unmooring yourself from your past, is some vital aspect requiring Wellsian time travel—and so I find it neither possible nor beneficial to naively pursue this deceptive concept that only creates impossible expectations. *The Great Gatsby* became a disconcertingly "meta" simulation of the social scene at Menlo as I grew to recognize and reconsider the same class tensions that I had been subconsciously a part of for years. I see that mere association with the "high class" had created for me a superficially buoyant identity that hid a large disconnect between my appearance and my reality, which was firmly anchored in aggressive mediocrity. This discrepancy is common at Menlo, where it manifests as insecurity and constant demands for validation, as evidenced by an obsession with flashy goods or an excessively pruned online facade. This pressure to self-reinvent is profoundly detrimental because it lures those of moderate means to run around in circles to prove their worth.

Meanwhile, the most affluent students can afford to take the high road and focus on real growth, knowing that all the proofs of status have been taken care of already. This unmooring is not authentic self-reinvention. In practice, "forgetting your past" demands an excessive amount of effort to satisfy the desire to always fill your empty history with something new.

In order to open up the superhuman capability of transcendental growth, we need to take the leap, toss out the empty promises of the American Dream, build on our roots, but most importantly, prepare for social tension. Menlo School tries to help with this. For instance, last year Mr. Schafer openly admitted in an assembly talk that "full equality [...] does not exist, though we might wish it did." But the school's collective affluence forbids a meaningful discussion about the alien underprivileged. Menlo ironically exemplifies what sociologist Rachel Sherman calls "a moral stigma of privilege;" she finds, and we demonstrate, that the rich are ambivalent—no, ashamed—about having money, for fear that a superiority in wealth would force some sort of unspoken, uncomfortable condescension towards the less wealthy. We talk about the gap but not its causes nor its projected effects, and as such, there is no one at Menlo telling everyone that "transcending your origins" will not work. Encouraging students to acknowledge their differences instead of covering them up will allow their school and home communities the opportunity of natural mutual benefit, both physically and ideologically. This culture of collective reliance and appreciation should be the one modelled in the "virtuous" American Dream. I call upon all to take the initiative and seek growth through "re-integration" of their identities, because no one is in a position to bring about anyone else's growth—and after all, no one will be *good* at guiding one's growth but oneself.