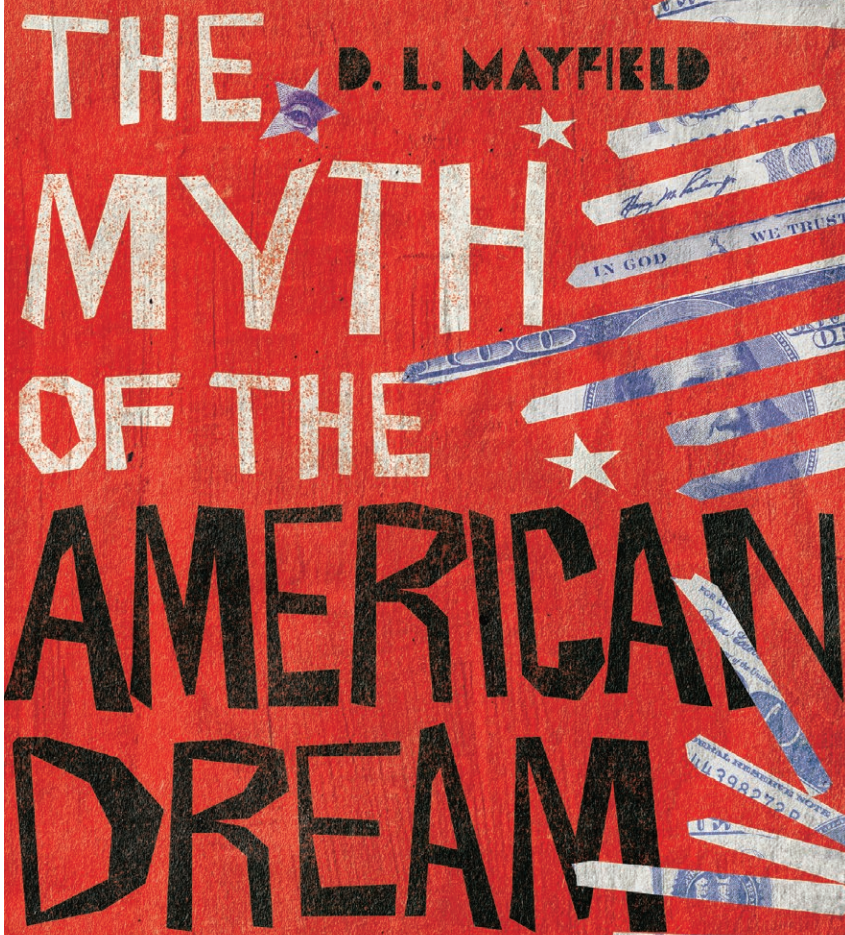


THE **D. L. MAYFIELD**
MYTH
OF THE
AMERICAN
DREAM



REFLECTIONS ON
AFFLUENCE,
AUTONOMY,
SAFETY, AND POWER



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1 ★ THE WALLS OF ROME

I WAS TEACHING AN ENGLISH CLASS in a high-rise apartment complex full of low-income families in Minneapolis—mostly immigrant and refugees from East Africa. The tenants' association paid for me to come and teach English, primarily to women who had never had access or exposure to education. It was a dream job for me, chaotic and joyful and never, ever boring. The women straggled into my class and settled heavily in their chairs, the first time perhaps in hours they had a moment to themselves. Papers and pencils were scattered on the tables in front of us. I taught them about the ABCs, how to hold pencils, how to have our eyes rove from the top left of the paper all the way down. We talked about our families, about grocery shopping, about rent problems, life in Africa versus life in America. We took a break in the midst of our three-hour classes for me to make them coffee and chai, pouring too much creamer and sugar into the mix, shooing away the cockroaches that always gathered in our makeshift kitchen.

I was trained to be a teacher, to be at the front of the room and command attention. To be an expert, to be listened to. But quickly I realized this wasn't what I wanted to be or what my students needed. We would interrupt an English lesson to talk about the actual problems they were facing—an eviction notice, a son getting in trouble at school, someone having a terrible headache, someone needing help reading a blood-pressure medication bottle. And I loved this because what I really wanted was to be of use, to be helpful. To make the lives of these incredible and complex women just the tiniest bit easier.

My classroom was loud, full of laughter, chairs scraping, women commiserating in languages that were decidedly not the one we were supposed to be studying. And none of it bothered me, except one thing:

the phones. Every woman had a small, compact, black cellphone—not a smartphone, just a utilitarian way for people to be reached in the case of emergency or missed appointments or reminders to pay bills. These tiny back phones never stopped going off, especially on Fridays. One such day I reached my limit. “Turn the phones *off*,” I said, loudly. “*Off*!” My students looked at me in surprise. They were quiet, for once, in the face of me trying to wield my influence, trying to muster up what little authority I was supposed to have. Finally, one of the women held up her little rectangle, the screen glowing green. “Teacher,” she told me, “teacher, we cannot read, we never know who is calling.”

The women around her nodded their heads. I stood up front, abashed at my ignorance. As their teacher I should know that to most of them, the numbers blurred together into the same indecipherable squiggles that covered the rest of our worksheets. They had to take every call because they had no way of knowing who was on the other line. It could be a family member in the camps in Kenya telling them they have no food and need money. Friday is payday, which is why the phones ring on this day. To ignore those needs would be a travesty, it would be unthinkable.

I went home that day and looked at my own phone. It did not light up on Fridays full of stories of people with no food in their bellies, of babies who were sick and the mothers who needed formula, of an illness that wiped out a caregiver. Living and working in refugee populations for the past decade had led me to feel secure in my belief that I was close to poverty, that I was starting to understand a bit how it worked in the world. But now I knew better: I always had been, and always would be, cushioned by the affluence of my life, by the community I was born into. I didn’t know what it was like to be born hungry. And I didn’t know how to be in a long-term relationship with those in the world who never, ever got their fill.

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Affluence has shaped my life and therefore my imagination. I see this in my work with refugees, how it started with me believing myself to

have something to offer to the poor and needy because I was born with more. It was a framework of charity, not righteousness—which in Hebrew can be translated as “justice.” I wanted to help individuals out of my personal cache of goodwill and resources, but I was unprepared to engage in the systems and policies that led to such deep brokenness and inequality. Quickly I realized that my charity was a failure. I could not fix generations of trauma, war, economic oppression, and political persecution with a few English worksheets or a bag of donated clothes. Instead, I would need learn how to show up, sit down, and listen as best as I could, thinking about my role as a follower of God in a world that produced such vastly unequal opportunities for flourishing.

Later in life, I was surprised to find that the circumstances that felt to me like a crumbling of my worldview were actually moving me toward a more biblical one. One of my favorite Old Testament theologians is Walter Brueggemann, who reads the Hebrew Scriptures with an eye toward economics. In the stories, songs, and legal documents of Scripture he sees the common narrative is one of “the sustained struggle between the insatiable acquisitiveness of Pharaoh and ‘neighborliness’ in commitment to sharing the common good.”¹

The Israelites are marked as a new and chosen people not just by the one true God they worship but by how they approach wealth, economics, and the flourishing of the entire community in opposition to the greed of the powers all around. The God of the Old Testament is radical in that he didn’t create humanity only to serve him—but this God of the Israelites cares about the very least in the community flourishing. This God cares about the land and wealth and how we use it to either exploit or to help one another.

In the New Testament this duality between the ways of pharaohs and the ways of Yahweh is expressed as the contrast between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms and powers of the world. Or, even more to the point, by Jesus simply telling his followers “you cannot serve both God and mammon” (the deity of money). God cares about how we operate our lives—including how we make, spend, and approach

wealth—because God cares about people. God is well aware that people need food, shelter, and safety to live, as well as a society modeled on the radical concept of hospitality, to ensure that everyone can flourish.

This is why the continual comparison and contrast between the ways of a God of neighborliness and the ways of the Pharaoh/empire are important in Scripture. It is important for those of us who are embedded in the dominant culture of the United States to take the time to meditate on the ways of Pharaoh, who ruled off of predatory economic practices and was never satisfied. The Bible shows us example after example of empire and how it works in the world: places like Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Rome. It was striking for me to realize how many Americans seem to idolize these powerful entities. Walking around Washington, DC, is a testament to these desires: the white columns and monuments and buildings in were modeled after Roman architecture to let everyone know that the American experiment would have a similar ideology.

America as the new Rome: that is what the founding fathers envisioned. And, as John Dominic Crossan writes, we see similar threads between the two cultures. Roman imperial theology held that peace comes through victory—through military might and the affluence of the empire.² Many of the same arguments have been made for America's foreign policy and military intervention in recent decades and the ever-expanding desire to consume more and stimulate the economy. But Crossan and other theologians contrast the peace-through-victory approach of imperial powers with the work of Jesus. In Jesus we see peace coming through true justice for all and through the ultimate work of self-sacrifice.

Jesus is the lens through which we all must view our lives in the midst of empire. We cannot escape the political, social, economic, and religious realities around us, nor should we. But an ethic of neighborliness—how we put our love of God in action—should drive us to interrogate the pernicious values of empire that we find ourselves swimming in. The stakes are rather high, however. In the end Jesus was killed by an empire

that found him threatening to the status quo. His body was nailed to a tree, left next to the side of a road to be a visible, decaying symbol of what happens when you subvert the powers of the world, when you insist that God's love goes beyond the borders we love to construct for ourselves, when you make it clear you will no longer serve the Pharaoh or his dehumanizing ways.

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In the Bible wealth is a blessing from God—but it is one that can make us forget our neighbors, especially the most vulnerable. It is a blessing and a curse; both of these things are true, and because of this dual reality economics is a core preoccupation of the biblical tradition. Old Testament laws were very much concerned with how the people of God would live together in covenant community: it was assumed you would be close to those who were poor, and therefore you would be more likely to be invested in their future. Radical, some would say foolish, economic practices were put forth by God, including the Jubilee laws, where every fifty years the land would be returned to the original owners, slaves would be set free, and the earth would rest and lie fallow for a year. It should not be surprising that these laws were never fully followed, but Jubilee remains a sign to the rest of the world that God's ideal economy is one where righteousness shall flourish, which involves limiting the disparity between the wealthy and the poor, where creation is valued. God's ideal economy banks on the idea that you shall know your neighbor who is suffering and that you shall be compelled to do something about it.

Pharaohs are always looking to create the illusion that all is well—building pyramids or coliseums or white houses as shining monuments to earthly success. But these illusions are shattered the moment we understand how those monuments came to be: built on the unseen labor and heartbreak of the marginalized. This is why relationship is at the core of God's way of working in the world, and I see these values most commonly personified not in affluent communities but the

opposite. People like my students intimately know both the blessings and the hardships of being connected to suffering and inequality at all times. There are those living in the shadows of the strip malls and city halls whose cell phones are always ringing, where a friend or family member is always in crisis, where generosity is always expected and nearly always given, sometimes at great personal cost. And there are other people, like myself, who have to wonder at the deafening silence in our own lives, our lack of connection to need and inequality that plagues our world.

Becoming a do-gooder, a teacher, a volunteer: these are the ways I tried to reach out because it was what I knew to do. Charity can sometimes feel like neighbor love, especially to the one giving it. But all too often it fails to address the roots of poverty. It baptizes the inequality of the world as normal—where some people give charity and others receive it, and it will always be so. The trouble with this narrative, born of affluence, is that we don't see these disparities, this hierarchy we have created, until it is much too late. Until we have effectively ruined any chance at a real relationship with God or with our neighbor. "Turn the phones off," I said that day in class, confident I was doing the right thing, unaware of my own ignorance of structures and systems of suffering. And my students, my friends, gently illuminated my world.

My own story is reflected in the pages of the Bible: how God uses the reality of the marginalized neighbor to check our natural desire to benefit from a predatory economy, of continuing on in a quest for more and more success and wealth and power. Neighbors change us if we let them. They reveal to me the walls I have built up in my own heart to not be responsible for my brothers and sisters in need. They point to the physical walls and the legal policies my country has designed to keep affluence in and poverty and need out. They show just how flimsy my theology is, how much I want to believe that everyone gets what they earn, that God really does operate like a cosmic vending machine in the sky. But walls, both psychological and physical, cannot stop the work of the Spirit of God. Even in the midst of policies and

programs and closed borders, God sends neighbors to us, phones ringing wildly, hands patting our back, giving kisses on both cheeks. And until we learn to love these neighbors as God does, the promise of Jubilee, of an economy based in righteousness and not greed, will hang over our heads like a curse instead of the blessing that it is.

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