

EXCERPT



The Myth of the American Dream
Reflections on Affluence, Autonomy, Safety, and Power

April 14, 2020 | \$22, 192 pages, hardcover | 978-0-8308-4598-9

Affluence, autonomy, safety, and power—the central values of the American dream. But are they actually compatible with Jesus’ command to love our neighbor as ourselves? In essays grouped around these four values, D. L. Mayfield asks us to pay attention to the ways they shape our own choices and the ways those choices affect our neighbors.

This is a book about paying attention.

For many of us, our lives have been carefully designed to follow certain values: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, perhaps. When I started to meditate on Luke 4, on taking Jesus at his word that this is the work he came to do, my own unspoken values started to shimmer to the surface. I began by asking questions: What is the opposite of poor? Of captivity, blindness, oppression? As I meditated on this question, the answers surprised me. The answers, it turned out, were the defining values of my life, the ones I was perpetually striving for, all in the name of a “good” life.

Affluence, autonomy, safety, and power. Four concrete values that bled into each other and seeped into my bones, affecting the decisions I made every day, from the tiniest to the monumental. I feel drawn to pursue these values with little to no self-interrogation: of course, I want a good house in a good neighborhood, a stable job, the ability to provide for myself and my family, the best education possible for our kids, a life of ease and comfort, the ability to keep death and pain at bay, the opportunity to lead and to be at the top of the hierarchy, to be seen as an expert and accomplished, to take what I am owed by my virtue and hard work.

Fighting for, hoarding, colonizing, and grasping after each of these values was something so ingrained in me that I didn’t recognize how powerful these desires had become or how they had oriented me in the opposite direction to Jesus and his central message of neighbor love. And I do mean opposite: when people of privilege pursue affluence, autonomy, safety, and power above everything else, not only do they miss out on the liberating and restorative work of Jesus, but they participate in greater inequality, segregation, and suffering for the most marginalized people in their community. When people of means pursue what is best for them and their own, their actions inevitably harm the common good. People like myself end up disobeying the central commandment of Jesus—to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves—all in the name of pursuing a dream life for ourselves.

The myth of the American Dream comes in many forms, but its most basic iteration goes like this: anyone can make something of themselves if only they try hard enough. This myth is a double-edged sword. If the systems and structures that shape your world have worked for you, then you will believe this idea; it will strengthen your worldview and give you confidence that you’ve done something right, that you’re being rewarded for a job well done. And if other people experience it differently—say, if they are unable to find a job that pays a living wage or get access to education or secure a loan to buy a house—then something must be wrong with them, not the system. The myth of the American Dream not only baptizes the actions and desires of the privileged but also places the blame of inequality on those who are already disadvantaged, instead of turning the focus on changing the unjust systems.

In this book I will consider the narratives lying beneath the surface of so many easy answers that both American culture and American evangelicalism have given to the problem of suffering in an unequal and unjust world. I will attempt to show what it has been like to learn to practice the discipline of lament and how I am being changed by my relationship to people who are exiles from the American

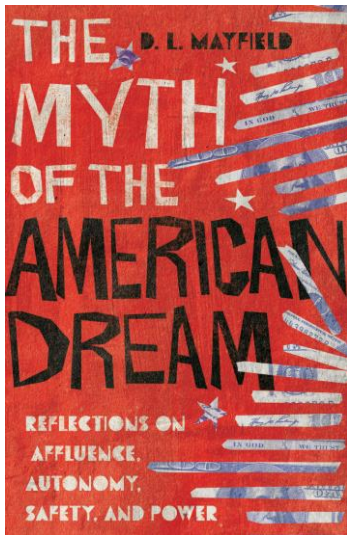


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D. L. Mayfield is a writer and activist who has spent over a decade working with refugee communities in the United States. Her work has been published in *McSweeney's*, *The Washington Post*, *Christianity Today*, *Christian Century*, *Sojourners*, *Vox*, and the *Englewood Review of Books*. She is also the author of *Assimilate or Go Home: Notes from a Failed Missionary on Rediscovering Faith*. She lives in Portland, Oregon, with her husband and two children.

Dream—those who have no way to win or who have been excluded from the very beginning. I will share how I have tried, and failed, and keep trying to live in opposition to what I've been told (even by the church) is best for me. The more I try to follow Jesus, the more I realize that if the gospel isn't good news for the poor, the imprisoned, the brokenhearted, and the oppressed, then it isn't good news for me either.

This is a book about paying attention. It's about being fully alive, not just to the glories of electric green moss stubbornly growing between the cracks of pavement but to the systems and structures and policies that dull our imaginations for a world that truly has hope and good news and beauty for everyone. Parts of it will be hard. We who have been willfully blind will have to commit to noticing it all—the good and the bad, the ugly and the absent, the decay and despair. We will have to pay attention to inequality. We will lament. And we will learn to live as exiles from those who have walked the path before us. What we notice will leave a mark on us; we will be changed and converted. We will feel the responsibility to do something in return. It will feel like a blessing and a curse all at the exact same time.

—Taken from the introduction



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