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The American Experiment

What is an American? We care about defining and describing the answer to this question because it strikes one of the most crucial questions in life: Who am I? Ironically, we as individuals are most insecure in our knowledge of ourselves. We crave more information - some solid facts or advice. So we pay attention to horoscopes, fortune cookies, and personality quizzes. We also crave community. We are intensely relational, so a lingering addendum subtly pervades all our thinking: Who am I in relation to everyone else? This is why talking about “What is an American?” involves both an individual and communal response. One cannot be a solitary American; the premise of this country was founded on democracy, and this emphasis on community is both a saving grace and a boiling pot of tension.

To be American is to be open to experimentation, and this goes against our natural inclinations. We want structure, safety, and security; but life does not follow those blueprints. It is instead an internal focus on constant change, transition, and attempts at success. What is success? It is an arbitrary feeling - a sense that all is well and that you are on the right track. It is what fulfills you. But the success of a nation depends not only on the accomplishments of the leader but also on the knitting together of all the people in it.

Because of this, success is a fickle friend. Some can be living their best life at the brutal expense of someone else. So achieving your dreams could go hand-in-hand with oppression. In

order for the new nation of the United States of America to become strong, we broke the backs of slaves to build their national reputation. In keeping colonies morally coherent and close-knit, outsiders were rejected or punished. To maintain order and tradition, women remained as keepers of the home while men fulfilled their own imposed duties. In modern history, we pride ourselves on eliminating these injustices and moving on, and this “moving on” is a huge aspect of ‘Americanism.’ We’re constantly changing. This isn’t to say that the rest of the world is stuck in posterity while we’re racing ahead. America is defined by change. We are obsessed with moving, either forward or backward, it doesn’t matter. There has to be constant motion, constant progression, constant alteration to our state of affairs. This could be in human rights, in technology, in literature, in education, or in anything really which involves our daily lives. We need an influx of information to be continually experimenting with life. Again, this is not to say that America excels at forward-thinking while no other country does; it displays a common characteristic of our country. This feeling of experimentation may exist in individuals around the world, but it is rare to see it embedded in the soul of an entire nation.

Experimentation is not mindless; it has a goal. Whether fully aware of it or not, every American is on the hunt for truth. This evasive treasure is at the heart of every experiment acted upon by our country and countrymen. There are several aspects of Americans that embody the search for truth: morality, intellect, and initiative. Our unique structure of community further aids our exploration. It is debatable whether truth is a solid entity or a fluid one - different for each seeker. Regardless of the definition of truth, the journey is what this life is made of, rather than the destination. And this journey uses each of the aforementioned tools on the lifelong experiment search for truth.

1. Morality

Morality has always been a foundation of American society. This is a core aspect because the individual morality of a person determines their character. Each of these personal characters make up a community, so the early founders of modern America emphasized moral excellence. For the pilgrims, morality rested in the Bible and Christian traditions. *A Modell of Christian Charity* exemplifies all the virtues that John Winthrop dreamed for the New World. He speaks of self-sacrificing for the community's welfare, justice and mercy prevailing selfish desires, and forgiveness and love being primary indicators of an American consciousness. Nearly a century later, John Woolman wrote about the same kind of morality. Woolman was a Quaker rather than a Puritan, and he espoused values centered on an inward focus for finding your "Inner Light." "From an inward purifying, and steadfast abiding under it, springs a lively operative desire for the good of others" (Woolman 495). Woolman understood that moral improvement is a process, and this desire has not faded with time.

People are not perfect, and perfection does not target a specific people group such as Americans, either. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* displays this sad truth. Equiano, along with millions of slaves, was grossly mistreated by men claiming to lead upright lives: "O, ye nominal Christians! Might not an African ask you - Learned you this from our God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you?... Surely, this is a new refinement in cruelty..." (525). Clearly, cruelty and hate can permeate an American consciousness just as easily as morality can.

Other writers from vastly different centuries noticed the same incongruity that Equiano did. Americans claim piety for themselves while hiding atrocities under a "Christian" mask. Jonathan Edwards decried this in *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. This now-famous "doom and gloom" sermon is more of an emotional appeal to abandon apathetic complacency.

“Your wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead... and if God should let you go... all your righteousness would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell, than a spider’s web would have to stop a falling rock” (352). Throughout this sermon, he contrasts this frailty of humankind with the authority of God to spur complacent Christians into action.

Hawthorne addressed the same subject in the fictional form of his short stories *Young Goodman Brown* and *The Minister’s Black Veil*. The main characters in these stories can see through the thin guises of townspeople pretending to be pillars of morality. It gives us pause to consider how many hidden reminders of immorality we hide behind the masks of acceptance, inclusivity, and the idea that we are all “good people.” Although a queasy topic, we could benefit from genuine introspection to see if our core values line up with what we need in our respective experiments. Masks serve not as catalysts for morality but as chains keeping us anchored where we cannot progress.

A propensity towards bias, hate, and harmful stereotyping is why people such as Benjamin Franklin encouraged constant self-improvement. Franklin detested shallow preaching and what he called a “Foppery in Morals” (462) that accompanied displays of insincere kindness. Franklin’s solution was similar to Woolman’s: inner, continual improvement. Ages later, Ralph Waldo Emerson focused more on self-reliance as a way to improve oneself, and although he didn’t call it morality, the net result is similar to Franklin’s. This was a way to discover one’s own weaknesses and preconceptions and conduct experiments to refine them into moral qualities of truthfulness, openness, and sincerity.

2. Intellect

Critical thinking is an essential skill in anyone. Few can say, though, that the entire fabric of their country was woven by a desire for intellectual freedom as well as physical freedom.

Winthrop described the lengthy process by which the Puritans decided to reject Europe and start fresh as colonists. It was not a hasty decision, but rather, one with careful deliberation - the same kind of deliberation that characterized John Adams and the other Founding Fathers to break ties with Great Britain. In Adams' letters to his wife, we can see how arduous this decisions process was, and yet he wrote that delaying in a hasty action was the wisest choice: "Time has been given for the whole People, *maturely to consider* the great Question of Independence and to *ripen their judgments*, dissipate their Fears, and allure their Hopes, by discussing... debating... so that the whole People in every Colony... have now adopted it, as their own Act" (Adams 556, emphasis added).

Moral advancement was matched by intellectual advancement throughout American culture. The early colonists were concerned with educating their children correctly, and a constant literary focus pervaded despite survival struggles. Throughout centuries, the desire for knowledge infected men and women alike, and this fuels each one's experiment in living. Samson Occom, a Native American liaison between various tribes and other Christian groups, wrote that after he had learned a little bit about Christianity, he "had a Stronger Desire Still to Learn to read the Word of God" (503). The same was true for anyone who received a taste of education and then realized they were parched for enlightenment of any kind. The French immigrant, Crèvecoeur, noticed this as well, writing, "The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions" (543). The only way to gain these new perspectives is through constant learning. Indeed, this has become almost the equivalent to a right if not a guaranteed American value.

Anyone who was denied the opportunity to strengthen their own intellect was a persecuted group. An early feminist, Judith Sargent Murray, equated the loss of intellect to a loss

of freedom, and women were victims of this deprivation. She worked hard to break down feminine myths and prove that women deserve rights and education as much as any other American citizen. When some protested that women did not have the mental capacity to use the right to vote, Murray countered, “Are we deficient in reason? We can only reason from what we know, and if an opportunity of acquiring knowledge hath been denied us, the inferiority of our sex cannot fairly be deduced from thence” (573). Anyone who keeps education under lock and key, only to be opened for specific people, is no less than a tyrant in Murray’s book, and most Americans would agree with her. Frederick Douglass experienced what happens when knowledge is refused: “I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the power of reason” (1060). Once Douglass learned how to read, the world was opened to him. He discovered his own mental capacities, and he would not give up until he could continue to pursue his own education. Not only he, but nearly every American, feeds his/her personal experimentation with this intense thirst for knowledge.

But from where does this intellect stem? Obviously, intelligence is not relegated to Americans only, and Europeans have a much deeper well from which to draw, do they not? Emerson had an answer for that as well: “Life is our dictionary” and “It is the raw material out of which the intellect moulds her splendid products. A strange process too, this, by which experience is converted into thought...” (816-817). Experience shapes not only our characters but also our thinking patterns. This is why the extreme diversity in America can lead to extreme intelligence as well, if appropriately applied. As a haven from persecution or the symbol of more potential, masses with myriads of opinions, backgrounds, and stories flock to one country. Rather than requiring a pilgrimage across the world, the world comes to us. What a rich

classroom! Emerson also warned, “Free should the scholar be, -free and brave... for fear is a thing which a scholar by his very function puts behind him. Fear always springs from ignorance... Manlike let him turn and face it... See it to be a lie, and you have already dealt it its mortal blow” (819). Having the ability to expand your mind and then actually doing it is an American ideal which is one of the best things to hang on for centuries.

3. Initiative

Throughout the history of America, initiative has been a typical response to some form of persecution, and this is reflected in the literature of that time as well. Bradford knew that he and his community would need fortitude in order to defy the odds of surviving in the harsh wilderness. Rather than waiting for a government program to suit them, the Puritans banded together and forged their own path. This resilience and initiative persists across centuries and is a distinguishable feature of Americanism. Crèvecoeur verbalized this in his *Letters from an American Farmer*. He noticed that, in contrast to imperialist France, America was composed of hardworking people from every race and background. The only requirement for being a good American was competence. “He is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds” (Crèvecoeur 543).

Initiative is what sets Americans apart. John Woolman showcased this mark when he fought against slavery in his own way by refusing to accept customers who wanted him to draft legal documents which kept fellow human beings enslaved. Benjamin Franklin is arguably the epitome of American initiative and resourcefulness in the way in which he would not allow his circumstances to prevent his pursuit of success and truth. William Lloyd Garrison joined their ranks by using his passion against slavery to create the only emancipation-oriented newspaper and to enact radical change: “On this subject, I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with

moderation. No!... I will not equivocate - I will not excuse - I will not retreat a single inch - AND I WILL BE HEARD” (747).

4. Community

The strongest aspect of Americans is the profound dependence on and value of community. Despite an Emersonian emphasis on self-reliance, life is useless without a core group surrounding each individual. For the Puritans, community was as necessary as shelter and water. They knew that being self-serving would guarantee failure and death. This value for our fellow experimenters in life has never left us. Throughout history, we have seen examples of when community works well (such as when Americans united during the Revolutionary War) and when it hides rather than helps (for example, the stories told in Hawthorne’s fictionary tales). Just like most aspects of life, community can be a double-edged sword. When used correctly, it is amazing and the perfect ingredient for a healthy society. When used for tyrannical purposes, the society is poisoned, but not irreparable. Consistent with the idea that Americanism is all about experimentation, the American Project has been focused on improving society through community. Catharine Beecher voiced her support of this when she encouraged all men to value women as members of society instead of merely valuing them as homemakers. Her logic was that all roles in community are important; the housewife and the grocer and the governor have equal value as improvements on the community. Even in slavery, having a friend and support group was one of the strongest factors both in helping slaves find freedom and in keeping them in chains. Douglass related, “It is my opinion that thousands would escape from slavery, who now remain, but for the strong cords of affection that bind them to their friends... the love of them was my tender point, and shook my decision more than all things else” (1063). Even a future of pain and misery is preferable if shared with community rather than spent isolated.

As our country has diversified, this has led to both issues and saving graces. Now everyone has a community in which they can belong. Natural coalitions form around personal identities, political issues, ideological stances, religions, education, and personal circumstances. Although this can ostracize some people - and it has quite often - this is also one of the best opportunities to advance one's personal intellect, initiative, and morality. America is one of the longest-lasting experiments originating not in monarchy but in close community, which acts as a strengthening agent. This will continue to last as long as Americans exhibit their individual characteristics while also being connected to their community.

5. Conclusion

Recently, we hear shouted from every news outlet that America is plagued by divisions, partisanship, and hate; and this is true to a certain extent. But I think it is time to stop assuming that every passionate disagreement is a mark of our country disintegrating. Dissent and discussion are core foundations, and we would undoubtedly be a much weaker country without it. The opportunity to critically develop and share your own opinion and is a gift which our society has fought hard to maintain. While we all have improvements to make in terms of equity and equality and the ways in which we express disagreement, the fact that there are divisions indicate that our experiments are active. It indicates that Americans still have that key initiative and intellect. It shows that everyone has a community to which they belong and will defend.

I think modern society suffers from comparison-caused inadequacy. We see the courageous examples given to us throughout history, and we stop there. We think that those people were especially significant and rare, and that the common person such as ourselves could never do something similar. But what if we are made of the same ingredients as Woolman, Franklin, Garrison, and Beecher? What if this pent-up initiative just needs a spark? There is no

telling what will inspire people. Most of the time, it is a simple idea: the horrific truth of slavery, the apathy in our own communities, climate change, legal issues, or a moving story. It takes an extra step to move past discouragement towards initiative. All our American heroes embodied these core characteristics of morality, intellect, and initiative, but who's to say that this could only happen in early America? Emerson believed that everyone has this capability resting within: "Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. Without it, he is not yet man. Without it, thought can never ripen into truth" (816).

Communities shift, morals can be altered, and information adds to our stores of knowledge; so to be American is to be active, never static. Every aspect culminates in our lifelong search for truth. We all long to know who we are, why we exist, and what we are supposed to do about it. We all want to find our own purpose; the irony is that we need each other in order to do that. History is not a dusty, neglected textbook; it is a vibrant companion which shows that our collective core has not really changed from colonial times. Americans still care about each other and our country. Everyone's hunt for truth leads them down different paths, but we are a people characterized by this difference and the acceptance of those differences. Acceptance is not easily attained, so Americans have developed the fortitude to fight for it. We still have improvements to make and experiments to conduct, but our foundation is firm, and I have no doubt that we as a society will continue to thrive. Just as our Constitution is a 'living document', withstanding the drastic changes and attacks of time, so too is an American a 'living experiment', able to adapt with continued experiments in living.

Works Cited

Belasco, Susan, and Linck Johnson. *The Bedford Anthology of American Literature, Volume One: Beginnings to 1865*. 2nd ed., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2014.