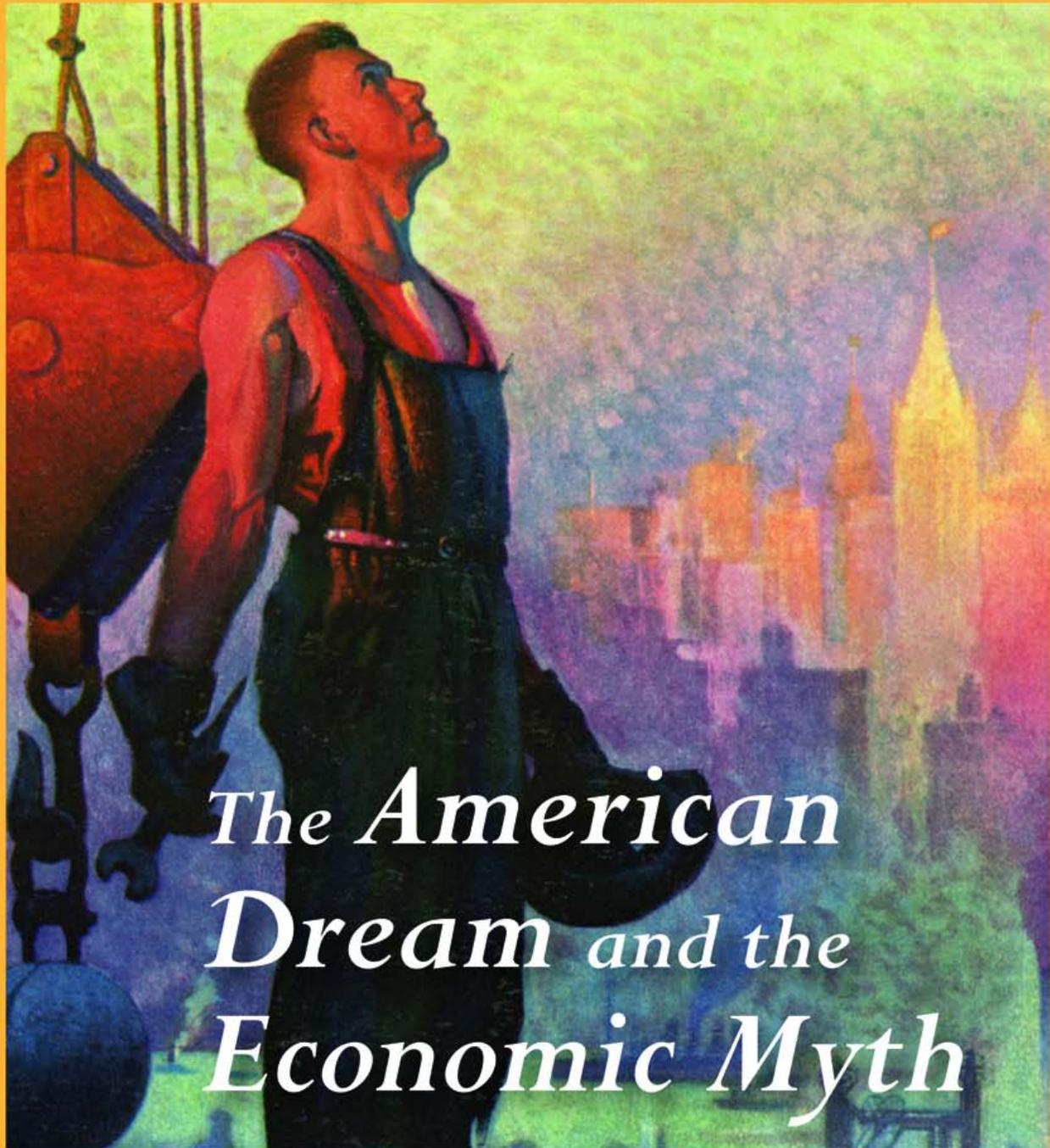
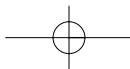
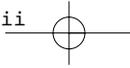


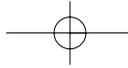
Betty Sue Flowers



*The American
Dream and the
Economic Myth*

Essays on Deepening the American Dream
SPONSORED BY THE FETZER INSTITUTE





THE AMERICAN DREAM AND THE ECONOMIC MYTH

Betty Sue Flowers

The American Dream as an Act of the Imagination

The American dream . . . is a wish the heart makes in its pursuit of happiness.

“A dream is a wish your heart makes,” my mother used to sing to me. I was reminded of this by a news story on National Public Radio about a Tunisian immigrant who was waiting with his wife and baby son outside a New York office to bid on a taxi medallion.

“What are you hoping for?” the reporter asked the wife.

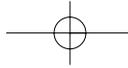
“The American dream, like everybody,” she said.

The husband, who worked twelve hours a day, six days a week, as a taxi driver, added that he hoped his son would grow up to be a doctor or a lawyer.¹

Listening to this story, I appreciated once again the brilliant insight of the Founders who made such a crucial edit of the philosopher John Locke’s original “life, liberty, and the pursuit of *property*.” Property is a thing. Happiness is an ideal, a story of the future created by the imagination. The American dream, even when it takes material form, is a wish the heart makes in its pursuit of happiness. It is an act of the imagination made vivid by the life and liberty that allow us to pursue it with hope.

To deepen the American dream is to engage the imagination—to create better stories of who we are and who we might become. But to create deeper stories requires us to look closely at the stories we already inhabit, both individually and collectively.

So this essay aims to look at the myths that have made us and the dominant myth that holds us now—the economic myth. It is the work of a poet to “dream otherwise,” with heart and soul as well as mind. The fervent wish my heart makes is that this essay will help lead its readers deeper into the soul dimension of the American dream.



The Power of Myth

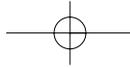
Americans live in a present that is shaped by their dream of the future.

So powerful is the dominant story or “myth” of a people that the first thing some of the colonists did after winning the Revolutionary War was to ask George Washington to be king. This they did even though they had been fighting for “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” for all men, who are, by their declaration, “created equal.” We’re lucky Washington refused, because the key element of the American dream is the primacy of the individual. In our constitutional system, rights inhere in the individual, not in a sovereign or even the state. From that founding premise comes the emphasis on the *individual’s* pursuit of happiness. The American dream is not a dream *by* America or *for* America but a dream *of* happiness to be defined by each individual American. It’s a dream of the future that shapes the present. Put another way: Americans live in a present that is shaped by their individual dreams of the future.

The power of stories—and dreams—to shape our reality is seldom acknowledged. Most of us simply don’t understand the extent to which we’re always involved in a story. We’re the storytelling animals. We even dream in stories. We are so occupied in telling stories to ourselves, however unconscious we are of the fact of doing so, that it’s considered a spiritual discipline simply to stay *present*, in the moment.

Each of our lives is a collection of historical events and facts, many of which we can do nothing to change. But we embed these facts in a narrative we tell ourselves and others, a story that often suggests cause and effect and that implicitly reveals what these facts mean to us. And it is this story we tell—not the facts themselves—that shapes our future.

For example, you could tell the story of your life as a hero story—that no matter what the obstacles, “I have overcome.” Or you could tell your story as a victim story—“I, who am innocent, have been made the way I am by what others have done to me. I am living proof of their treachery.”² A third approach might be to tell the story of your life as if life had a purpose and as if that purpose were to learn and to love. If you had a car wreck, for example, that left you with a broken leg and a long period of rehabilitation, the hero story would emphasize the triumph over obstacles; the victim story would focus on the accident and all the pain of the broken leg and the lost productivity during the rehabilitation time; while the “learner” story might be a story about learning how to slow down and express gratitude to all those who were helping you.

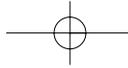


As you tell these stories, different facts come to the surface, depending on the plot. Each plot acts as a kind of magnet for “compatible” facts, that is, the facts that fit that particular plot. More to the point, different futures become possible depending not on the total field of facts but on the story you tell about the facts that your plot has “picked up.” Any story we tell about the future is, of necessity, a fiction since there are no facts about the future. At the same time, we’re always building our lives in relation to this imagined future, so that the fiction we tell is extremely powerful in shaping the future.

If it’s the story that makes the difference, then why not simply tell good stories about yourself? If you’re struggling to pay the bills, why not simply say, “I’m rich!” and trust that the world will conform to your story? The answer is that if you follow the example of Voltaire’s philosopher Pangloss in *Candide* and proclaim, “Everything’s for the best in this best of all possible worlds,” some part of you will say to yourself, “Oh, no, it isn’t.” If you say, “I’m rich,” and mean it literally when you’re not rich, the survival mechanism in you that evolved by looking for real tigers in the jungle and real food to bring to the campfire will say, “Oh, no, you’re not!” Effective counterfactual stories are easier to tell to others than to ourselves.

To some extent, the claim that the present is shaped by the story we’re telling about the future seems akin to the idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy—that our expectations shape events. The difference between prophecy and storytelling, however, is that when you practice using different plots, you don’t hold the story as a belief or a forecast but as a plausible fiction. Once we’ve moved from holding our stories of the future as unconscious beliefs to realizing that our stories are “made up,” we’re suddenly confronted with a vista of freedom that is breathtaking. When we see the extent to which we *tell* the world of the future into being, we can also see that we have the power—and the responsibility—to create a future that is different from the past.

Even the present is experienced as an aspect of the future into which we are living, for we notice and respond to those elements in the present that conform to our story about reality. If, for example, we’re telling a story to ourselves that our son will be a champion baseball player, we’re likely to notice and remember his triumphs and discount his failures. We’ll be alert to opportunities that arise in baseball and perhaps overlook those that might arise for him in music. Or, for example, a global business manager whose story of the future of China is of vast social unrest will behave quite differently in the present from the manager whose story of China is of increasing market openness and rewards for businesses who enter the China market early. There are enough facts available to support either



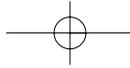
story, and experts often get the future wrong. For example, in 1899, the commissioner of the U.S. Patent Office proclaimed, “Everything that can be invented has been invented.” And Lord Kelvin, president of the Royal Society, claimed in 1895 that “heavier-than-air flying machines are impossible.”³

For many years, I’ve worked with teams in the United States and abroad to build futures scenarios—sets of mutually exclusive but equally plausible stories about the future. Even though usually written for corporations, these scenarios are often focused not on the future of the company or the industry but on the global future—politics, economics, the environment, and so on. What makes this form of planning different from the creation of forecasts is that scenarios do not claim to be predictions about what will happen in the future. They are “merely” two or three different stories about the future, whose aim is to challenge the “mental maps” that leaders hold of their businesses and of the world in which they are operating. In addition, scenarios help managers become aware of the way the future is shaped by the stories they tell about it.

To create forecasts as opposed to scenarios, we typically extrapolate the past into the future. But the one thing we know about the future is that it will not be like the past. Creating two contradictory fictions or scenarios about the future, which we hold in our minds *as* fictions, allows us to think about the future without falling into a false sense of security that we know what the future will be. Telling powerful stories about the future is a form of leadership, whether or not we occupy leadership roles in our professional lives.

I first observed this as a child, playing with my cousins. One of my cousins would tell outrageous stories about what would happen if we knocked on the door of the house on the next block—the old woman who lived there would invite us in and give us cookies, he predicted. Or if we walked to the town square, Fatty Maxfield, who ran the secondhand store, would trade us a machete for the tooth my cousin had lost overnight. As the oldest cousin, I knew that both stories were unlikely futures. But the stories were powerful enough to draw the gang of cousins forward into adventures that we would otherwise not have had. *We were* given cookies—but not by the woman whose door we knocked on first. And Fatty Maxfield *did* trade us the machete for my cousin’s tooth—when we threw some licorice and money into the deal as well.

A frequent refrain I hear from successful entrepreneurs who tell me their stories is that if they had known in the beginning what they know now, they would never have tried. They told themselves unlikely stories about what would happen, and the facts rose up to meet their fictions.



The Horatio Alger story of rags to riches is a familiar one to Americans. In that respect, we are a “young” country. In some Hindu cultures, souls are judged “young” when they spend lifetimes seeking physical goods. Eventually, after many lifetimes, they become interested in a more complex pursuit—power. And then, after many more lifetimes, they learn that an even more intriguing life pursuit is the good of the community.⁴

This way of looking at “young” and “old” souls reminds us that we create purpose in our lives through the story that we tell about the direction in which we’re going and what we’re doing along the way. To deepen the American dream requires us to accept the responsibility for the freedom we have to tell a better story about who we are and who we might become. The first step in telling a better story, however, is to understand the large cultural stories—or myths—that have made us who we are.

The Myths That Have Made Us

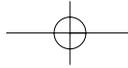
A myth . . . is not a story that is untrue but a cultural story that shapes what we experience as reality.

It may seem strange to talk about the “myths” that have made us. After all, we usually think of a myth as an old fiction, like the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, or we use the word *myth* when we’re talking about a belief that isn’t true. But a more significant definition of *myth* is “a belief or a subject of belief whose truth is accepted uncritically.”⁵ This definition makes no claim about truth one way or another. The hero myth, for example, may be true, or it may not be. What makes it powerful is that we accept it as a matrix of meaning, as one way we explain what reality is and what is valuable. So a myth, as I use the term, is not a story that is untrue but a cultural story that shapes what we experience as reality.

In the West, and especially in the United States, four myths have shaped us: the religious myth, the hero myth, the democratic or enlightenment myth, and the economic myth.⁶ Each of these myths has a characteristic way of making sense of reality as well as a characteristic set of values and actors. And each is still influential—although the economic myth is dominant now.

The Religious Myth

Historically, the religious myth was at the center of the faith communities that helped provide the infrastructure of our democracy. The early writings from the colonies are steeped in biblical analogies: Moses and the



Promised Land, the people of the covenant, the city on a hill, the light unto the nations, and so on. The Founders broke away from their lawful king by citing a higher authority in the Declaration of Independence: “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.” Humans are “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.”

These allusions to an underlying religious myth in documents that ultimately proclaim a necessary separation of church and state reflect the dual conditions under which we originally flourished—secularism in law but tight-knit religious communities in practice.

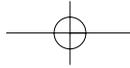
The religious myth is still powerful in many individual lives and communities—so much so that many religious groups are currently working to establish in law what they feel is disappearing in practice. But in the United States, the national community that arose out of sharing common ideals from the Judeo-Christian heritage has fractured, and most individual communities have a hard time achieving the sense of civic spirit that is remembered from a more homogeneous time.

The surge of interest in “building community” attests to its breakdown. But it’s not clear that a direct effort to “build community” will work in the absence of common, essentially religious ideals or values for which individuals are willing to sacrifice. Athenian citizens, for example, had to swear an oath to uphold “the ideals and sacred things of the city.” The most common use of the word *sacred* in our public life is in relation to the word *cow*. For the most part, we treat each other not as citizens but as consumers.

John Stuart Mill said something about happiness that applies to this notion of building community. He said that happiness is the test of all rules of conduct and the end of life; but he also said that this end—happiness—is attained only by not making it the direct end.⁷ The same can be said of community. Community is not a direct end but arises as a by-product when people are working for common ideals that are larger than themselves—such as “the ideals and sacred things of the city” or the ideals that the religious myth holds as important to all.

Like most myths, the religious myth has its dark side. It tends to foster an in-group mentality that can, at its worst, embody a logic that demonizes the other: if my god is better than your god, then I am better than you; and if I’m much better than you, you may not even be fully human. Even those groups that came to the United States to escape religious persecution often persecuted dissenters within their own communities.

The religious myth can be recognized not simply by its external adherence to a religious creed but also by its emphasis on obedience to authority and on purity as a virtue, no matter what the creed. Within the



religious myth, there can be no compromise—if God is thought to require a certain kind of behavior, that’s it. From this perspective, some environmentalists are acting from within this myth when they accept no compromise in relation to competing goods—when they refuse to compromise on the purity of their purpose but instead see issues in terms of black and white and right and wrong.

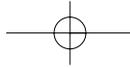
The Hero Myth

Because it forms the heart of most stories, the hero myth is our most compelling myth, the one we turn to for entertainment as well as inspiration. Although many people have referred to the United States as a “Christian nation” or a nation with a Judeo-Christian heritage, we appear to celebrate individuals not for caring but for daring—not for community spirit but for the solitary spirit of the cowboy. “A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.” We applaud when the sensitive boy finally socks his opponent in the jaw. John Wayne would never turn the other cheek.

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell outlined the major aspects of the hero archetype.⁸ The hero is born of humble parents or is of noble birth but raised by foster parents. Then comes a call to adventure, which the hero may try to avoid but eventually follows. Helpers along the way lead him to the point of the supreme trial, which may be followed by a journey across water or a dark night of the soul. If the hero survives all these adventures, the return to the community carries with it a gift, a “boon”—whether in the form of relief from the external threat (the dragon) or, as in the case of a religious hero, a new religion.

Even politicians call on this archetype, telling us stories of their humble origins, their poor but proud parents, how they triumphed over adversity or a life-threatening challenge—war being a particularly popular challenge—and how they came back with a gift to give to us if we will only vote for them. Our leaders let us know they occasionally go to church so that we can feel assured that they acknowledge something as superior to themselves. But basically we are looking for heroes, not exemplars of our religious heritage.

If the hero myth is so compelling to us, why have we traditionally emphasized our religious myth, with its family values, as the basis of our public morality? “Sheer hypocrisy,” some might say. But I think not. Our culture has often had a double standard for its hero myth: the winners played the hero game, while women, minorities, and “inferiors” were expected to organize their lives around the myth of religion and to behave for the good of society.



This double standard does not differ so greatly from that of the ancient Greeks from whom we inherit our hero myth. The Greeks thought that only a few could be heroes. Women, slaves, “barbarians,” and anyone else not a citizen of the city-state were less than human because they were caught in the animal realm—the repetitious cycle of nature. Aristotle thought women and men couldn’t be friends because to be friends, you had to be equals, and women, caught in necessity and repetition, were not equal to free men. You could tell no story about such animalistic lives. Of course, we do not agree; each life *was* a story—the Greeks simply didn’t tell these sorts of stories. We’re still learning how to tell our cultural story through the lens of ordinary men and women and not just through the biographies of great men.

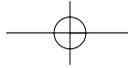
Heroes in ancient Greece were free citizens who chose to take the hard path of adventure and suffering. They were among the best, the *aristoi* (from which we derive the word *aristocrat*), and their lives were not mere repetitions for the sake of sustaining life but made a linear story. Like Achilles, they were willing to give up their comfortable animal existence for a shorter life on earth, if necessary, in order to have ongoing fame in the history of their tribe.

But heroism exists only within a storytelling community.⁹ Without storytelling, heroism becomes a cultural impossibility. When Achilles sulks in his tent at the beginning of the *Iliad*, it’s not just that he’s upset that his prize—the girl Briseis—has been taken from him. He doesn’t express any tender feelings for Briseis, whom he has had to give up to Agamemnon, who has in turn had to give up his prize—the girl Chryseis—to the priest of Apollo to save his army from the plague. Briseis, Chryseis—they’re almost interchangeable. What torments Achilles is not the loss of the individual girl-prize but the breakdown of the prize-giving system. What’s the point of choosing a short, heroic life over a long, happy life if the culture itself does not support the values and rewards of heroism?

When United States soldiers returned from Vietnam and complained about the lack of parades, they were not simply whining about being underappreciated. Without the cultural context in which the self-sacrificing warrior is a hero, the sacrifice itself seems a waste, a cruel joke. When the culture does not tell the story of the hero, the soldier is in danger of becoming meaningless “cannon fodder”—a powerless victim.

The Democratic Myth

The third important myth that has shaped us is the democratic myth. It could also be called the “myth of enlightenment,” since it arose during



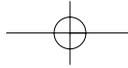
the eighteenth century, when reason could become the unchallenged arbiter of reality, even being celebrated as a goddess in Notre Dame Cathedral during the French Revolution.

The democratic myth traditionally uses symbolism taken from the religious myth but uses it allegorically (to suggest one thing in terms of another) rather than symbolically (to allude to a hidden or higher world). For example, the eye of God, or the all-seeing eye on the back of the dollar bill, does not evoke spiritual mysteries but serves to lend authority to the sentiments expressed in the Latin phrases *novus ordo seclorum* (“a new order of the world”) and *annuit coeptis* (“He smiled on our accomplishments”). The pyramid on the dollar bill, as Joseph Campbell points out, emphasizes one of the great strengths of the democratic myth: that truth can arise from any quarter, just as the top of the pyramid can be reached from any side.¹⁰ In the democratic myth, truth is a function of experimentation and reason, not a dictum handed down from the top of a religious hierarchy.

Like the religious myth, the democratic myth has its shadow side, as the Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn discovered when he first came to the United States. Solzhenitsyn spoke of the loss of community and soul in a culture based on law.¹¹ Our tendency to locate the good in the rational and objective rather than in the beautiful and subjective and to devalue sources of insight from the nonrational world means that, for example, whenever we face difficulties in school financing, we almost always cut art and music first.

Such a society can weaken its “ethos”—what ties us together besides the laws we all have to live by. The contrast between ethos and law shows up in the apocryphal story about a group of Americans playing rugby with some English boys. At one point during the game, one of the Americans threw a forward pass to someone. The English players were appalled. “But,” the Americans argued, “there’s no rule against it.” “That’s right,” the English players replied, “but it’s just not done.”

When reason is king, the ties to the transcendent loosen. We live by human law rather than divine inspiration or guidance. Human-centered though it is, however, the enlightenment myth contains its own characteristic form of idealism in which we dream of a better society, set up according to reason—the laws of Nature and of Nature’s God. But if reason is used not to follow the dream of a better society but simply to attain earthly riches, the depth dimension of life begins to evaporate. Early in the Renaissance, the playwright Christopher Marlowe showed through his character Dr. Faustus what happens when the man of reason sells his soul for power in the material world. Faustus can do anything he wants,



but in the process of fulfilling his desires, he loses a larger capacity of imagination. All his desires become trivial ones, such as playing practical jokes on the clergy.

Not only have we lost the illusion of the perfectibility of society, but we have also lost communal faith in the existence of a Designer behind the design. “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless,” observes a Nobel Prize–winning physicist.¹² Joseph Campbell used to say that you could always tell what the dominant myth of a culture was by looking at its tallest buildings.¹³ In medieval times, the tallest buildings in any city were the cathedrals; later, princely palaces and government buildings dominated the landscape; now the tallest buildings are commercial, reflecting the economic myth within which we live.

The Economic Myth

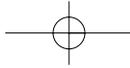
The economic myth is potentially the first truly global myth.

We live in an economic myth the way the fish swim in the sea—unconsciously. We appeal to the “bottom line” to win arguments, and we see the history of the world as an economic history, not as the march of great men across a stage or as the working out of the plan of God. In the United States, we win elections by offering not a “covenant” with America (a term coming from our religious myth) but a “contract” with America.

The economic myth is not synonymous with capitalism, although varieties of capitalism are its hardest expressions, from the classically laissez-faire American style to the social democratic varieties in western Europe to the socially authoritarian styles found in parts of Asia. Whatever form the economic myth takes, it displays three central characteristics: its medium is numbers and pictures; it is egalitarian, not hierarchical; and its ideal is growth.

Numbers and Pictures

One of the reasons the economic myth is potentially the first truly global myth is that it is not bounded by the traditional fences of language. The numbers representing gross domestic product (GDP) apply to every nation, and the lifestyle shown on popular television dramas can be seen all over the world. The fall of the former Soviet Union was a triumph not simply of democracy but of capitalism and the economic myth—and the media that convey them: the numbers, which provide stark objective contrasts, and the pictures, more powerful than thousands of words.



Egalitarian, Not Hierarchical

In its pure form, the economic myth is egalitarian in the sense that anyone's dollar is as good as anyone else's dollar. Worth is based on net worth, not on the nobility of one's parents or the color of one's skin or one's gender or even what country one is from—all those accidents of birth.

The economic myth is a horizontal, not a vertical, myth. It counts rather than evaluates, locating value in the exchange function rather than in something "higher up" or absolute. In part, this leveling has been responsible for the saying that American culture knows "the price of everything and the value of nothing."¹⁴

The economic myth honors quantity over quality. Unlike the democratic myth, in which truth *can* arise from any quarter, in the economic myth, truth *does* arise from every quarter, through counting or polling. Power lies in the numbers.

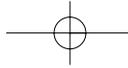
The Ideal of Growth

The economic myth has at its base the ideal of growth: bigger—or more—is better. In addition, we tend to think of this growth as necessarily involving competition—although its aim is monopoly rather than simply "a good fight." Implicit in much of our language about growth is a kind of early Darwinian notion of natural selection: the strong survive and grow, while the weak inevitably, naturally (and therefore, "rightly") are weeded out.

Like all myths, the economic myth allows for some possibilities and not for others. If we do not understand the limitations of the economic myth, we will not be able to deal with the difficult challenges that the global community faces. And if we attempt to solve our social problems through recourse to the religious or hero or democratic myths, in which our social institutions are embedded, we will fail because these earlier myths no longer have as much power as the economic myth. We will also fail globally because these earlier myths, unlike the economic myth, are Western. While we can argue that the economic myth arose in the West, too, its basic premises—the broad characteristics that distinguish it from other myths—are being accepted worldwide, although not without struggle.

Threats Posed by the Economic Myth

The economic myth poses three main threats. The first is the *loss of the values embodied in our earlier myths*. The values embodied by the hero myth are distorted by the current economic myth in which they appear.



For example, in the economic myth, we tell the hero story as a matter of good versus evil. But ancient stories often honored the opponent. Hector has traditionally been as honored as Achilles, even though he is on the losing side and is defeated after having run around Troy in sheer terror. The Romans even traced their ancestry back to the Trojans, who lost the war. We, by contrast, tend to dress our heroes in white and our enemies in black. All evil is projected onto the enemy—who, by this black-white distinction, is no hero. So when the enemy dies, there is no poignancy, as there is when the hero Achilles kills the hero Hector.

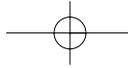
Because our hero myth is embedded in our operating economic myth, we have celebrities instead of heroes. Celebrities are known for having *more* of what we already value—more money, more beauty, more power—rather than leading us to expand our values, as earlier heroes might have done. Their stories make us think of luck rather than courage or the doing of great deeds.

For all its drawbacks, the hero myth offered an ideal of excellence and individual responsibility, which was especially inspiring to young people. But how can we extol individual responsibility in a world where we're just a Social Security number with the slight chance of fifteen minutes of fame on some talk show—if we have a bizarre enough victim story to tell?

The crisis of the hero myth in our culture arises from many causes, including the lack of scope for heroic action in groups without social support or economic opportunity. Such “discarded” groups then develop alternative routes to heroism, such as those offered by gang cultures, in which heroic virtues of courage, self-sacrifice, and disregard for one's own life become the stuff of street legend and graffiti.

It seems we don't know how to integrate these heroic impulses in our young men into the larger society and its values. Traditionally, this integration was done through war and the sports that echoed battle. While fathers can still play softball with their sons, sports has become big business, and even in high school, only the best usually get to play, limiting the opportunities for heroic deeds, no matter how local the stage. War, too, has become difficult to sustain as a heroic enterprise, partly because of its mechanization. Mechanization increases efficiency but does little to highlight individual heroic deeds—or even individuals themselves, either those who are fighting or bystanders who are killed. In recent wars, for example, the deaths of civilian individuals have often been referred to as “collateral damage.”

We don't know how to sustain heroic energy because we don't have a culture that honors it except in sports. The poet W. H. Auden remarked



on this in his poem “The Shield of Achilles,” which imagines Achilles’ mother returning to heaven for new armor for her son, just as she does in the *Iliad*. But this time, when she looks at the shield, she sees not the integrated harmony of the community, which was displayed on the original shield of Achilles, but scenes from modern life, including one of a boy in a vacant lot throwing stones at a bird:

That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,
Were axioms to him, who’d never heard
Of any world where promises were kept
Or one could weep because another wept.¹⁵

Without community, there cannot be authentic individual heroism. We are wrong to think that heroism is a matter of will alone, of the individual cowboy riding into the town, cleaning out the bad guys, and then leaving. Our problems are more difficult than that—and always have been. Without a community to sustain it, our hero myth is doomed to debasement. And traditionally, it is the underlying religious myth, with its promise that individual sacrifice for the good of the whole is not in vain, that has offered us that vision of community.

The power of the religious myth gave us a reason to sacrifice in the present for the good of the whole and a better future. But in an economic myth, service to the community—or to our homes and families—has no economic tag and therefore no way to be valued. Undervaluing service—whether reflected in our lack of support for full-time single parents or the steady decline of teachers’ salaries in relation to those of other professionals—will continue to have a debilitating effect on communities.

The democratic myth held up the ideal of “one nation under God, with liberty and justice for all.” In an economic myth, we observe that he who has the most money gets the best justice.

In addition to the loss of the values embodied in our earlier myths, there is the danger that the citizens of a society dominated by the economic myth risk the *loss of a sense of larger significance*—or even of personal significance. The economic myth is the story of a process—growth itself—rather than of a character in action. The Greeks had their founding stories of gods and heroes, and the Hebrew and Christian traditions had stories of God and his people and prophets. Even the democratic myth had the implicit sound of God’s machinery, ticking away through time, just waiting to be discovered in the inevitable march of scientific and technological progress.

But the economic myth, like the natural world, doesn't have a plot. Some might say that such a random collection of ups and downs, like the history of the Dow Jones Industrial Average, is hardly any story at all, simply a changing pattern along a trajectory of growth. And even that trajectory is "accidental," like everything else in the story. In this myth, humans are the victims of large forces over which they have no control—terrorism or crime or pollution or guns or global competition or inflation. The aim of living is survival itself—or, depending on resources, a quality of life that is measured in terms of costs versus benefits. From the perspective of this myth, the Islamic extremists, who are willing to die for their story, seem incomprehensible.

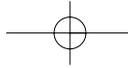
The third threat posed by the economic myth is a *loss of capacity for civic discourse*. Like the phrase "We the People," the expression "civic discourse" seems a little old-fashioned. We report political news not in terms of the complexities of the issues and the historical background or how the common good might be furthered but in terms of the power relationships of the personalities involved, as if politics were like a simple sporting event—who's winning and who's losing, or, to follow the little arrows in a popular newsmagazine, who's up and who's down.

In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman claims that in our culture, "all public discourse increasingly takes the form of entertainment. Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business."¹⁶

In show business, sex and violence sell. That is true, too, in television news, the storyteller of our society. Under our economic myth, we make political decisions on the basis of the story we are being told in order to sell commercial products. We believe the violence we see and experience on television, not the statistics we read, so we perceive the world as much meaner and more violent than it really is—which is why we vote for more prisons in an era of declining crime.

In short, we cannot expect the economic myth that shapes our society to foster the ideals of individual responsibility that the hero myth embodied or to encourage the ideals of community the religious myth promoted or to emphasize the pursuit of a common good that the democratic myth supported. And yet these ideals of responsibility, community, and the common good are absolutely necessary for the health of the civic spirit.

Even so, we can't simply return to the old myths, no matter how many movements in their direction we try to beat the drums for. These myths don't hold up for us now. We don't want to look up to the chosen few as our heroes, we don't want to reintroduce the sense of division and intolerance that a ruling religious myth so often fosters, and we're rightly sus-



picious of the idea of one common good because we know how much suffering has been caused in our diverse society by insisting that our identity fits one mold. For example, we can no longer blindly tell our history from the point of view of Europeans like Columbus. We don't have one story about who we are anymore, so how can we articulate a common good?

We have to begin by raising our awareness of the myth that we are in—how we are caught in it and how it shapes us individually and as a nation. And then we must learn to tell better stories about who we are and who we might become. To deepen the American dream calls on our minds and hearts—and also our imaginations.

The “Pursuit of Happiness”

Pursuing happiness, we can learn wisdom—and the power of love.

The quest to deepen the American dream through the power of the imagination begins deep in the center of the economic myth—because that's where American culture is. The United States is currently the clearest embodiment of the economic myth not only because of its economic prowess but also because of its continuing link to the founding principle of the “pursuit of happiness.”

To deepen the American dream, we can imagine a story about the pursuit of happiness that neither ignores the economic myth nor fights against it but instead uses its elements in a transformative way.

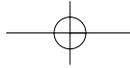
The desire for happiness is both a curse and a blessing—a curse because we're so often discontent, imagining happiness to be down the road rather than here and now, and a blessing because the pursuit of happiness can turn out, in the end, to be a spiritual journey. “Divine discontent” can lead us on a learning journey toward wisdom. Pursuing happiness, we can learn wisdom—and the power of love.

The Self-Help Society and Helpers Along the Way

A recurring folktale motif features three sons who are sent on a quest—to find a treasure or rescue a princess, for example. We might call this quest the “pursuit of happiness.”

When the first son is halfway down the road, he comes across a fox and says, “Get out of my way, fox; I'm on a quest!”

The second son, going down the same road, comes across the same fox and says, “Get out of my way, fox; I'm on a quest!”



The third son—whose name is always something like “Dumb Hans” or “Stupid Jack”—comes across the same fox and says, “Who are you? Can I help you?” The fox then, predictably, offers Dumb Hans the key to the castle or a magic cloak or crucial information that leads to a happy outcome.

The youngest son’s impulse toward generosity of spirit is also an American virtue, perhaps developing in response to the hardships early settlers shared, where survival depended on helping one another. Again and again, that impulse toward a common good is the door that unexpectedly opens to the fulfillment of individual dreams of happiness—even though the stories that emphasize individual success sometimes obscure this true source of happiness.

Such stories of the lone individual succeeding in the world are the familiar basis of the self-help book. If we took that popular genre and applied it to the folktale of the three sons on a quest, we might have the following tale:

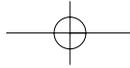
Once upon a time, after Dumb Hans has succeeded on the quest when his two brothers have failed, the oldest son buys a self-help book, “How to Succeed on the Quest.” Halfway down the road, he comes across a horse. He rapidly thumbs through the book—“Hmm. There’s a chapter here called ‘Be Sure to Talk to Foxes’ but nothing about horses.” Then he shuts the book, looks up, and says, “Get out of my way, horse; I’m on a quest.”

The second brother has bought the same book and, like his older brother, does not find anything relevant to guide him in response to this new circumstance and so reacts the same way.

Dumb Hans, true to his nature, greets the horse—and the horse has the key to the castle, the magic cloak, the crucial advice, whatever.

The moral of the story is that help was on the road for all three brothers, but only the youngest brother found it—not because he followed a recipe of what to do but because his *way of being* allowed the help to become apparent. There is no “to do” that elicits the helpers—only a way of being. The youngest brother is fully present to those he meets along the way.

In the economic myth, with its emphasis on efficiency and time management, the discipline of being fully present to whatever emerges—whether fox or horse or human need—is particularly challenging. From a spiritual perspective, love is always present. But to *experience* love requires us to step out of the hurry of measurable time—time as money—



into a sense of slow time—time like honey, smooth and sweet. No wonder that the son who takes the extra time to pay attention to the life and situations around him—even though this slows him down and appears to be a distraction from the goal—is called “Dumb Hans” or “Stupid Jack.”

“More” in the Economic Myth

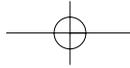
In the economic myth, the aim is not goodness, as in the religious myth, or truth, as in the democratic myth, or excellence, as in the hero myth, but “more.” Over time and with the help of advertising, Americans have been taught to believe that happiness depends on having “more” in the material world. And a corollary to aiming for more material goods is the drive toward perfection—the desire to have perfectly white or straight teeth, the perfect slim figure, the best appliance or car.

If happiness is pursued as “more” or “perfection,” however, it will never be achieved. There is never enough, and nothing is ever perfect. As wise observers have always taught us, the pursuit of happiness is most fruitful when it is experienced as the pursuit of wholeness—a journey that depends on a recognition that our flaws, the shadow side of ourselves, must be acknowledged and accepted as part of us, even as we attempt to improve. Our failures become part of the *meaningfulness* of life that gives it shape and individuality and that leads to understanding and treasures of the spirit.

There’s an old folktale of a man plowing his field who stumbles across an object, and when he stops and looks at it closely, it turns out to be a box of treasure. It’s a common motif, characterized by the saying “Where you stumble, there your treasure lies.”

During the voyage of the *Beagle*, when it anchored off the coast of South America, Charles Darwin climbed a mountain in the Andes. While on the peak, he looked down at his shoes—maybe he stumbled, the account doesn’t say—and next to his feet was a fossil seashell. Darwin realized that the seashell’s journey—and therefore, the mountain’s journey—from ocean floor to high peak must have taken a much longer time than the earth’s age of six thousand years, as theologians had computed, based on the Bible. Some looking has profound consequences. Where we stumble, there our treasure lies.

I once quoted this to someone who responded, “Is that like ‘If life hands you a lemon, make lemonade’?” The answer is no—for several important reasons. In the folktale of the man who stumbles while he’s plowing, for example, the first aspect of the story to notice is that the guy



is going forward when he stumbles. In his moving ahead, in his walking, in his work, he stumbles. Then what does he do? He looks closely at what he's stumbled over. Now if he had responded the way most of us have been trained to do, he would have simply stood right back up, picked up his plow, and kept on going. But if we're not too eager to get right back to plowing the same furrow, we can use the stumble as an opportunity for deep seeing.

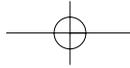
The process, then, is to move forward, stumble, and look. If we're not moving forward, we won't stumble. If we don't stumble, we won't stop to look. If we look closely enough, we might find treasure. This is a process that puts the emphasis not on willing but on looking—not on making lemonade but on really seeing the lemon. To look—to really look, with full consciousness, fully in the present—changes things. To practice seeing rather than acquiring puts the “more” of the economic myth against an intangible—not more *things*, but more *seeing*, a deeper experiencing of the things and events in our lives.

People who feel that the emphasis on more contributes to the ills of our current American society might object by saying, “Why put the emphasis on *more*—even if it's more experiences rather than more things? Why not try to fight directly against this emphasis on more?”

The answer to this call to arms against the materialist emphasis of twenty-first-century American culture is that it won't work. You can't fight the energy of a culture directly; you can only use the energy that's available and turn it in a new direction.

Here's an example of what it means to turn cultural energy in a new direction—to use the energy coming at you, as the martial arts discipline of aikido teaches, in order to move something in a new direction. There was a time when Texans exercised their natural right to throw soda cans out of their pickup trucks. Then a brilliant ad campaign came along that used an aikido approach to littering—it simply demanded, “Don't mess with Texas.” That slogan caught the energy of fierce independence and pride of place and turned it into a defense of Texas—*from* littering! What had formerly been a special effort of “good citizens”—carrying empty drink cans home—came to be expected from everyone. Picking up after oneself wasn't a form of “goodness”; it was just ordinary, decent human behavior. It didn't require an extraordinary act of will; it was just the reality of what you did out of pride because you simply “don't mess with Texas.”

So while we can't fight the materialistic aspects of the economic myth directly, we can use the aikido approach to influence the direction of its energy. For example, the contemporary interest in ecology has led to a wide-



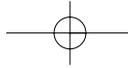
spread recognition of the intricate ways that complex systems interact to produce healthy environments. The same is true of complex economic systems—as with the natural environment, we are all interconnected. When one nation, for example, enacts trade policies for its own self-interest, other countries can suffer to the extent that they can't purchase products from the first nation—the familiar downward spiral that can occur in a trade war. What seems best for short-term self-interest can work against long-term self-interest.

The aikido move in this case would involve a simple shift in emphasis that would benefit the system as a whole while at the same time not requiring a frontal assault on self-interest, one of the main energies of the economic myth. This shift is simple but not easy. It requires the telling of a new story that would move from a focus on short-term, geographically constrained self-interest to a longer-term, more broadly defined self-interest. Sometimes all this takes is looking farther down the road. Henry Ford did this when he understood that if he paid his workers more, he might not rake in as much profit in the short term, but in the long term, his workers would be able to buy the cars they were making.

Pursuing the happiness not only of one's own "neighborhood" system but also of other geographically remote systems reflects what many people have discovered in the course of observing their own lives: that the most efficient way to pursue happiness is to pursue the happiness of someone else. This observation, if acted on by a growing number of people, would help create enormous wealth in the "economy" of happiness.

One of the founding theorists of capitalism, Adam Smith, argued that when every individual follows his own self-interest, the interest of the whole is also achieved, as if by the movement of an "invisible hand." What has changed as a result of globalization is that the "whole" that is affected by the movement of individual parts is not just a national economy but the global economy of vastly different cultures and levels of prosperity. Because we are all linked in an enormously complex global economy, the long-term self-interest of the individual is allied with the self-interest of everyone on the planet. To illustrate with a simple example: because of jet travel and global trade, a small, local outbreak of bird flu in a remote corner of the globe—remote from a U.S.-centric point of view—threatens the health of every schoolchild in Arkansas, as well as of everyone else in the world.

The "more" achieved by emphasizing wholeness rather than perfection and by integrating larger global systems and longer-term perspectives into the energy of our self-interested pursuits requires a modification

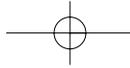


of our youthful narcissism as a culture. Americans sometimes appear to be looking at the world as if into a mirror—seeking our own reflection in the values and aspirations of other cultures. We feel we know what they want because we know what we would want in their place. President Lyndon Johnson, in attempting to bring the Vietnam War to a conclusion, offered a generous array of improvement projects to the North Vietnamese—a large dam project, for example, and all kinds of aid for education and social welfare. He was frustrated by the apparent disregard from the North Vietnamese, who didn't seem to appreciate what these gifts from the American people could do for their economy and refused to come to the negotiating table on anything but their own terms.

While it's an overstatement to say that Americans know the price of everything and the value of nothing, sometimes the pursuit of happiness, when it takes an economic form, can appear callous, "unevolved," and immature. Our culture sometimes seems to have the quality of a youthful hero, setting out on his journey, optimistic and brave, partly because optimism and bravery are attractive features of his character but also partly because he is ignorant of the complexity of the trials and darkness that lie ahead on the journey. In time, he is bound to stumble. And sometimes that stumbling results in a wound. So whether or not the wounded hero finds a material treasure when he stumbles, he does have the opportunity to deepen his empathy for all who are also wounded. The hero who has been wounded on his journey comes back with a blessing or gift for society—sometimes in the form of a developed compassion—that can arise even from adventures that were failures.

Stumbling and being wounded can contribute to our individuality, to our creativity, and to our compassion. The archetype of the wounded healer points to the blessing that some people can give to others because of what they have learned from their own painful experiences along the way.

This archetype also applies to a culture when it attempts to integrate an experience of failure rather than to ignore it. The United States is in a position of leadership in the global economic myth in part because that myth is so well exemplified in our culture and because we have been very successful within it, but this leadership also depends on the willingness of other nations to trust us. The goodwill that poured in from all over the world after 9/11 was elicited by sympathy for our wound—"We are all Americans." At that time, our strength and vision were accompanied by humility and gratitude, and a doorway to a shared vision of the future opened up that has not been as open since.

*Seeing Self-Interest Anew in the Economic Myth*

Once a student asked me, “Why doesn’t Mother Teresa burn out? She helps people all day long, and she has a lot of responsibility and stress. So why doesn’t she burn out?”

I couldn’t answer that question immediately, so I began reading about Mother Teresa. One story seemed to offer a clue. Mother Teresa said that when she embraced a leper, she was embracing her Beloved, Jesus. Mother Teresa’s experience is linked to Jesus’ story about the Last Judgment, when he says to the righteous, “For when I was hungry, you gave me food; when thirsty, you gave me drink; when I was a stranger, you took me into your home; when naked, you clothed me; when I was ill, you came to my help; when in prison, you visited me.”

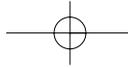
The righteous protest, saying, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and fed you, or thirsty and gave you drink, a stranger and took you home, or naked and clothed you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and come to visit you?”

And Jesus answers, “I tell you this: anything you did for one of my brothers here, however humble, you did for me.”¹⁷

Thinking about Mother Teresa and this story, I was reminded of the way that saints always protest that they aren’t especially good. Even Jesus responded to the ruler who called him “Good Master” by saying, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.”¹⁸ When we hear these protests, we chalk them up to the saints’ humility—just another evidence of their saintliness.

But what if Mother Teresa was telling the literal truth? What if she deeply felt the truth of Jesus’ statement that to do good to another is to do good to her Beloved? We don’t think we’re especially saintly to feed and clothe our Beloved, nor do we credit ourselves with any particular goodness when we feed or clothe our children. After all, they and we are “one.” But what if we saw the interconnectedness of all humans that way—so that to feed them was to feed ourselves? If we really *saw* this interconnectedness, we wouldn’t have to *will* to be “good”—feeding them would just come naturally. In fact, if we think of “goodness” as involving a lack of self-interest, feeding the hungry wouldn’t be “doing good” at all. It would simply be a natural response to the reality that “I and the other are one.” So when *doing* good becomes *seeing* that I and the other are one, goodness simply becomes natural and easy rather than difficult and willed.

Experiencing the interconnectedness that forms the basis of economies—and the basis of the economic myth—has the potential to transform our



pursuit of happiness from short-term self-interest to a wider view that our long-term self-interest is closely bound up with the happiness of others.

The economic myth highlights the potential of an interconnectedness that is even global. The opportunities arising from such interconnectedness, both in business and in the building of community, are huge—and so are the problems. Dealing with complex, large-scale problems such as global warming requires a new kind of leadership. We can no longer depend on a hero riding in on a white horse to save us. Leadership in the future must arise from within groups that embody the diversity of those touched by the problem.

But the solutions to complex issues cannot come from multistakeholder efforts unless the individuals who work together can put their own egos out of the way. Setting aside the ego in order to allow a new future to emerge requires a journey of the self—a hero's journey *inward*. Put another way, to deepen the American dream in order to pursue the long-term self-interest that necessarily includes the happiness of others, we need to imagine a hero's inner journey in the pursuit of happiness.

The Success Dragon and the American Dreamer

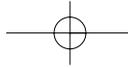
Reality—the world as it is—remains. But reality—the world as it is experienced—is completely transformed.

Alongside the external hero's journey we've already discussed is another, inward journey, whose archetypal model is Dante's journey into hell, purgatory, and heaven, drawn onward by his love of Beatrice—and later by love itself. The aim of this inner adventure is to overcome the fears that attend us as human beings in order to find the love that is our true nature.

These adventures—the outer and the inner—are not mutually exclusive, although most of us, when we're young, begin by pursuing happiness and only gradually see the deeper pursuit as one of love. The hero's outer journey is circular, with a return to his society at the end; the inner path is more like a journey through a series of concentric circles—and with the ultimate "vision" of reality as occurring both "outside" and "inside" the self.

To some extent, at least in the beginning of this inner hero's journey, it may feel as if the outer pursuit of happiness is abandoned. Fear itself of the possible loss of the dream of happiness may prevent us, both individually and culturally, from taking this deeper inner journey.

Imagine the "outer" hero undertaking an "inner" journey through consciousness in the pursuit of happiness. On this journey, the hero travels



through four circles, or progressively deeper levels of the inner life: the level of security, of intimacy, of power, and of love. Metaphorically speaking, each of these levels is associated with a specific “dragon,” which evokes a specific fear and guards a particular treasure. At each level, the dragon operates as the barrier to attaining the treasure—but the real or inner barrier to finding the treasure is the fear that the dragon evokes.

Level 1: The Pursuit of Happiness as Security

Dragon: Success

Fear: Death

Treasure: Growth

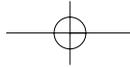
One reason the economic myth is so powerful is that it is strongest at this first or outer circle of the inner journey. We fear that if we don’t succeed—in getting food, safety, love, and all the other pyramidal goods of Maslow’s hierarchy¹⁹—we will die. But spiritual traditions across the world teach us that in order to grow, the familiar, small, self-centered personality does indeed have to die.

The pursuit of happiness can end right here, where it normally begins. We can spend our entire lives pursuing security and never engaging the battle with the success dragon that would lead to the treasure of growth.

Why is success a dragon to be slain in the pursuit of happiness? Because success, by definition, relies on a measurement by other people’s standards and by a comparison of one’s accomplishments to others. You can’t judge success of this kind without a precedent or a standard of comparison. For someone pursuing happiness on his or her own unique path, there can be no success—or lack of success—because no one else is on the same track. Who can win a race when there’s only one runner?

If you’re traveling on your own unique path, where the concept of “success” is meaningless, you may still have to fight the success dragon simply because life confronts us with “standardized tests.” We face external judgments in relation to our income or position or looks or any of a number of other measurements. And because we’ve been schooled to avoid the feeling of failure, we have learned how to sniff it out so far down the road in front of us that we can be misled into taking detours off the path of our own life.

The worst effect of our repeated attempts to avoid the feeling of failure is the damage it does to creativity. The creative process—so crucial to the pursuit of happiness—does not occur in one sudden eureka moment. It takes place in four distinct stages: preparation, pursuit, incubation, and insight.



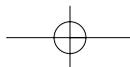
The first stage, preparation, requires being so immersed in the problem or issue that you know as much as possible about it. A new physics theory is not going to pop into a brain that is not soaked in physics. Our schools are set up to serve us fairly well in this first step of creativity—courses offer specialized knowledge, and in good schools, we're encouraged to learn as much as we can. Academically inclined students experience the pursuit of knowledge alone as a pursuit of happiness. This initial stage is so important in preparing the field for creativity that the American dream, with its prospect of a better life for one's children, has always been associated with education. When we lose the pursuit of excellence in education, we profoundly weaken the possibility of fulfilling the American dream.

Although good schools are designed to help us succeed in the preparation phase, they serve us poorly in the second stage, which is to go so far down the road of the subject, with intense passion and curiosity, that we risk possible failure in the pursuit of the unknown or in the attempt to do something never done before. We are so trained to avoid the feeling of failure that most of us avoid going very far down the road of any subject.

I was made aware of the crucial aspect of this second stage when I taught honors students in an English class. I couldn't understand why very bright students waited until the last minute to write their papers, even when they had plenty of time. But then I realized that by waiting until the last minute, they could never fail, no matter what grade I gave them. If they received a poor grade—well, what could they expect of themselves at three in the morning? So they never had to internalize the feeling of failure because they never tested their limits. And because they never reached their limits, they never asked me for the help I could have given them. Instead, I corrected the essays at the level on which they were written—far below the level of the students' true capacities.

Avoiding failure is a learned rather than a natural human reaction to experience—after all, a toddler learning to walk will fall and fall again and each time will get back up to try again. But somewhere during the process of education, children striving for an A internalize anything less as a failure, no matter by what educational route they reach that lesser grade. We learn to define failure—and then to avoid it.

To pursue happiness—to “follow your bliss,” in Joseph Campbell's memorable phrase²⁰—means that you have to be willing to travel to the edge of failure. And when you reach that edge, you have reached stage three of the creative process, the stage at which you let go of the problem because you've done all you possibly can. The problem drops into the unconscious—and if you're lucky, after this incubation period, the insight



pops up out of the unconscious in the eureka moment that we usually think of as a “bright idea”—stage four.

Creativity and individuality are the treasures of growth that the dragon of success guards at the level of security. Unless the success dragon is slain, it will rob you of the experience of the present. Success is always planning ahead. Success is always in a hurry to get to the next stage. I once had a student come see me during my office hours to ask how he could get through the class more quickly.

“Why do you want to get through the class so quickly?” I asked. “Don’t you enjoy it?”

“Oh, yes,” he said, “but I want to graduate sooner.”

“Why do you want to graduate sooner?”

“So I can get a job sooner.”

“And why do you want a job sooner?”

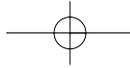
“So I can retire sooner.”

“So you can die sooner?” I couldn’t resist asking.

Success is always in a hurry. But the creative child within is fearless and foolish and joyful. One morning, I was bustling around fixing breakfast before going to teach, and I decided to go outside for the paper. My son, who was five at the time, walked down the driveway with me—and then beckoned for me to go on out to the secluded street that led up a hill. He said, “Let’s walk to the top of the hill and stand there and look back and appreciate everything.”

Joseph Campbell enjoyed telling a version of Friederich Nietzsche’s parable about the journey from childhood forward. As a young person, you’re a camel—you say “put a load on me,” and you go out into the desert with that load. In the desert, the camel turns into a lion, whose strength is relative to the weight of the load that was on the camel—the heavier the camel’s load, the stronger the lion. The job of the lion is to slay a dragon—and on every scale of the dragon is written “Thou shalt.” Each scale of the dragon is, in effect, a rule. The rules for success, the rules you might unthinkingly follow just because everyone else does, the rules that define what you’re led to believe you are—all must be sacrificed. When the dragon is slain, there emerges a child, the “twice-born,” acting out of his own center.²¹ The “twice-born” child differs from the child at the beginning of the journey, who is fearless and authentic simply through ignorance. The “born-again” child sees with new eyes made wise by the journey.

When success, as defined by the culture, is held up as the chief embodiment of the American dream, we lose the impetus of creativity that lies at the heart of our remarkable founding, both as individuals and as a



country. We begin to travel down the road of decline and fall made familiar by the stories of hubris (*Macbeth*, *Edipus*) and of past empires (Egypt, Troy, Athens, Rome, Spain, Great Britain). Like them, we fight to avoid the death of our triumphant selves—even though the “born-again” child cannot appear until the success dragon is slain.

Level 2: The Pursuit of Happiness as Intimacy

Dragon: Expectation

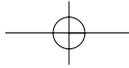
Fear: Letting go

Treasure: Bliss

In our culture, even those who do not pursue happiness as success often pursue it as relationship. The romantic myth is everywhere. Movies, especially, hold up the pursuit of happiness as being, in essence, the pursuit of romantic love, often as an antidote to the cultural obsession with success and money. But awash as we are in romance stories, we are very impoverished when it comes to dynamic, interesting stories of intimacy in *long-term* relationships. One reason is that romance is a single, predictable kind of story—success or failure in overcoming the obstacles to achieving one’s desire—while long-term relationships are created day by day, with a greater or a lesser degree of imaginative vitality. A boy and girl in the pursuit of romance are in the grip of an archetype with a very familiar structure; a man and woman making a third thing, which is marriage, are embarking on a journey into the unknown—unless, as commonly happens, they take over the story of their parents and unconsciously attempt to replicate that relationship as their own.

Whether partners expect their marriages to be like those of their parents or to be a continuation of the romance narrative, insofar as they expect anything at all, they are avoiding the test at the crossing of this ring—slaying the dragon of expectation. The more we think we know about romantic love, the more expectations we build up. We desire so much to be fulfilled in the ways we expect that we cling even harder to the pursuit of happiness as romance, setting ourselves up for disappointment when our specific expectations are not fulfilled.

The dragon of expectation must be slain so that we can *let go* of happiness as defined by the romantic myth and receive it *as it comes* in relationship—not as the fulfillment of desire but as the appreciation of what is. The kingdom of heaven is “spread out upon the earth, and people don’t see it.”²² From this perspective, bliss is not the outcome of a romantic



quest but is always available in the present, if we “see” the kingdom of heaven that is already available.

One of the interpretations of the biblical story of Adam and Eve is that they never left the garden—they just grew up and lost the experience of the garden as “Edenic.” Put another way, children quit being children when they begin to awaken sexually, become self-conscious, and start worrying about fig leaves to cover what may be unacceptable in themselves. Peer pressure and criticism lead some to fear that they will miss out on the pursuit of happiness because they don’t fit the roles the story seems to call for—they’re not handsome enough or beautiful enough or rich enough.

But to pass beyond the level of stereotypical romance, you must believe you are loved as a unique individual, as if, like all heroes, you were specially birthed. You must be loved for who you are, not the success or beauty you have. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden, Americans sometimes lose their powerful sense of themselves as an experiment—“newly born” children of the Enlightenment imagination, which claimed a breathtaking power of self-governance belonging to “the people” and based on “unalienable rights.” This is a powerful story, poorly reflected in many of the subthemes of the economic myth as they are popularly translated into popular culture or ritualistic patriotism of the kind that simply claims that “America is the best.”

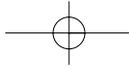
Level 3: The Pursuit of Happiness as Power

Dragon: Control

Fear: Loss of control

Treasure: Destiny

At this level, the ego struggles to maintain its dominance, even as it catches glimpses of a larger “will” to which it is called. When you are called to a larger adventure than the pursuit of your own individual happiness, one of the hardest challenges is giving up control—the illusion that you are the master of your fate. The moment you align your will with a larger or higher one, your sense of identity, even your own sense of self, is open to transformation. What helps us on one level of growth may hinder us at the next. Perhaps every growth in consciousness is a crisis of authority, even the authority of our own habitual personality, the “I.” As Martin Buber put it, “The free man is he who wills without arbitrary self-will”:



He believes in destiny, and believes that it stands in need of him . . . yet does not know where it is to be found. But he knows that he must go out with his whole being. The matter will not turn out according to his decision; but what is to come will come only when he decides on what he is able to will. He must sacrifice his puny, unfree will, that is controlled by things and instincts, to his grand will, which quits defined for destined being. Then, he intervenes no more, but at the same time he does not let things merely happen. He listens to what is emerging from himself, to the course of being in the world; not in order to be supported by it, but in order to bring it to reality as it desires.²³

The source of this “larger will” can be found in many ways. In the life of Gandhi and in the life of Martin Luther King Jr., it was found in a larger vision for the people they led. In the life of Winston Churchill, it manifested itself, among other ways, as a sense of “fit” between his own sense of his capacities and what the times demanded; in the life of Socrates, the “will within” came in the form of a still, small voice that gave him the simplest of guidance—a “no” if he was going in the wrong direction. When his followers wanted Socrates to escape from the death sentence the people of Athens had declared for him, Socrates refused on a number of grounds, one of them being that the voice had not said no at any time during the trial, and so the outcome was not an evil one for him. Like Socrates, many ordinary people have done extraordinary things when they felt “called” or guided.

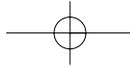
Level 4: The Pursuit of Happiness as Love

Dragon: Reality

Fear: Fear itself

Treasure: The kingdom of heaven

When the inner hero has surrendered to the larger will, or destiny, all the rules change, and the hero encounters paradoxical instructions: “Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those you treat you spitefully”²⁴—or in the Buddhist tradition, nonviolence, even when survival seems at stake. In Socrates’ case, the inner voice did not protect him from death; in fact, it appeared to lead him to it. The “reality” of death as something to be avoided at all costs—a reality that Socrates’ friends urged him to heed—did not stop Socrates from following his larger “calling.”



When the fearful version of reality, with all its agreed-on rules for success, is vanquished, a new world becomes visible in which the heart, released from the narrow pursuits of the “puny, unfree will,” creates a place for love to manifest and healing to occur.

One of the best stories illustrating this comes from the Grail quest stories of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. One of the knights on the quest for the Holy Grail, Perceval, comes to the castle of the Fisher King. The king is in terrible pain, and Perceval should have asked the one question, straight from his heart’s compassion, that would have ended his quest with the realization of the Grail: “What ails thee?” But following the rules of knightly conduct, which forbade one from questioning anyone in authority, he doesn’t and so has to wander for many years before finally coming to that same moment again. When he comes to this second opportunity, after many trials, he becomes “a child” by asking the question straight from his heart: “What ails you?”²⁵

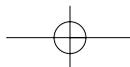
Right action arises out of love—an insight that Saint Augustine captures in his often quoted injunction to “Love God and do what you please.” The assumption here is that the love of God leads to an alignment with God’s will. One who loved God would not need laws to guide conduct. Love alone is the law of the kingdom of heaven—so much so that the bodhisattvas vow not to enter heaven until the last soul on earth has been helped to enter too. In this kingdom of heaven “spread out upon the earth,” we still face pain and grief and death. But we “fear not” because we are not alone on that journey: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.”²⁶

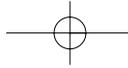
What disappears at this level is not evil but the *fear* of evil. What is promised is not happiness but *presence*—variously described as the fulfillment of the larger self or the presence of God or a sense of meaningfulness or the understanding of an emerging future or the love of people and the world. Without fear, love can flourish—and where love flourishes, we experience the joy that goes beyond happiness.

Reality—the world as it is—remains. But reality—the world as it is *experienced*—is completely transformed. By undertaking an inner journey in the pursuit of happiness, we come to a realm of meaningfulness that lifts us out of the material jungle of the economic myth into a deeper fulfillment of the American dream.

“A More Perfect Union”: Deepening the American Dream

How well we tell this first truly global myth—the economic myth—will determine the future of the American dream.





If we return to the economic myth from the deepening inner journey through the circles to love, we can perhaps see the American dream through new eyes. The issue becomes not how to fight the materialism and narcissism that seem to infect our culture but rather how to enter into it and see how it can be transformed from within.

Soon after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, I participated in a National Issues Forum deliberative dialogue titled “Americans’ Role in the World” in which the dialogue group was given four possible paths forward:

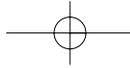
1. International order: Using our power to secure peace
2. Preserving our global future: Facing the hard tasks
3. The democratic project: Ensuring people’s rights
4. The global-market prescription: Lifting all boats

As I sat in the circle, it seemed clear to me that each of these options embodied one of the archetypal myths that have shaped us:

1. International order: The *hero myth*, with the United States using its power and acting unilaterally, if necessary, to make the world safe
2. Preserving our global future: The *religious myth*, with the United States taking the lead as a kind of global charity worker to address famine and other issues
3. The democratic project: The *democratic myth*, with the United States working to strengthen democracy in other countries
4. The global-market prescription: The *economic myth*, with the United States promoting global free trade

Throughout the discussion, the participants deliberated back and forth as to whether the global collaborative work to preserve the future was more sustainable than the democratic project or whether, given the terrorist threat, we could realistically choose any option other than “international order.” No one put forth the idea that number four, the global-market prescription, was the least coercive and most suited to our time. For those of us who are idealists and who care about the social fabric and the social safety net, the “market” seems to belong to the “other side.” It looks like the problem, not a doorway to the solution.

But if we are to deepen the American dream, we must start where we are. We must explore the myth we’re in for the possibilities it offers. The philosopher Herbert Spencer said that evolution moves “from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity toward a definite, coherent heterogeneity.”²⁷



We need a new myth that takes into account our diversity but makes it coherent—one that allows us to stick together in the name of a higher ideal and to work for a common good but at the same time to celebrate our individuality. We need a higher organization of our complexity. We need a new myth of who we are—and who we might be.

But how do we make a new myth? The first thing to understand about myths is that we can't simply make them up. They arise out of what is there. We can't invent a myth of community and wait for it to take hold. We have to work within our own myth, however impoverished it seems to us. To deepen the American dream, we have to look at the opportunities offered by the economic myth within which we live.

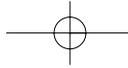
*Opportunity 1: The Economic Myth Supports
a Systems View of the World*

When everyone's business becomes everyone else's business, too, our interconnections have to be figured into our decision making. It's ironic that some of the downsizing in corporations that has resulted in the loss of jobs is the consequence of a call for tighter operations from big investors—often workers' pension funds. More and more, we see the need to look at the environment as an interconnected system, to look at our families in terms of systems theory, to look at biological life itself as a complexity of interacting systems. We're all woven into the same net, and if we ever truly grasp the significance of this, our short-term them-versus-us habit of formulating problems will have to change.

From an economic perspective, the task of building the future must take everything into account. That means that we work not simply for an ideal of purity or perfection but for wholeness. We work not for control but for coherence of parts—for what might be called harmony. We have not yet begun to understand, even at the level of the individual, what an ideal of wholeness might mean. Such an understanding requires not only an individual undertaking of our own inner hero's journey but also a decision to look at the whole picture, including the unintended consequences of all that we do, from building new freeways to starting a war.

*Opportunity 2: The Economic Myth Allows
Everyone to Play the Game*

If we could truly see the interconnections of the global economy, we would see that in the long term, our self-interest coincides with the health of the whole. In a systems-conscious, deepened economic myth, nations



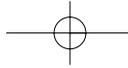
decrease in importance as mediating institutions, just as multinational corporations and other financial institutions increase in importance. The long-term self-interest of economically oriented institutions does not necessarily coincide with the self-interest of individual nations, as Ruzaburo Kaku, CEO of Canon, points out: “Today there is only one entity whose effort to create stability in the world matches its self-interest. That entity is a corporation acting globally.”²⁸

The global economy is healthiest when more people are “winning” and thus forming wealthier markets for goods and services. Competition under the economic myth will always involve comparison—who’s doing better than someone else. But it’s not necessary that competition be organized like a sports event, with a winner and a loser. We fall into that way of thinking because it’s characteristic of our version of the hero myth, which insists on the kind of competition in which there is a clear winner—whether a runner or a nation. By definition, the rest of the competitors are losers. Thus in a heroic myth, business is run as a race against competitors. In a deepened economic myth, business could be seen as part of an ecosystem in which survival depends not just on heroic excellence or economic growth but also on innovation—finding new niches and connecting to the whole in new, value-adding ways.

In a deepened economic myth, a business enterprise is more like an organism in an ecosystem than an engine in a factory. As the economist Michael Rothschild and others have pointed out,²⁹ our metaphors of the economy as an engine have led us to imagine we can “tinker” with highly complex systems, ignoring the unintended consequences that occur as the result of interfering with vitally interconnected parts. If we thought of the economy as an ecosystem, we might require an “environmental impact statement” any time we intervened.

If the economic myth has the potential of leading us to see the world more in terms of living organisms and less in terms of machines, we also have the possibility of appreciating all the subtle, interlinking lives that contribute to the health of the whole. The work of groups can become both more efficient and more significant as our increasingly complex world requires a level of response and innovation beyond the capacity of any single team member.

A story that illustrates what happens when a system is viewed as a whole is told of the design and building of a new car. The work involved a number of engineers divided into teams, each responsible for one aspect of the finished product. Because of the intense time pressure, teams initiated quick fixes on their own whenever anything wasn’t working quite right. But many of the quick fixes produced unintended consequences and



problems for other teams. For example, solving a vibration problem by adding structural reinforcements increased the weight of the car and created new problems for the chassis team. It wasn't until a working group made up of several teams got together and developed a systems understanding of the whole process that solutions that benefited the whole were discovered, and the car was delivered early and under budget. One by-product of seeing the system as a whole was that the various teams began to speak together as one "we": "Up to this point, there had been someone to blame for every problem: the other teams, their bosses, not enough time. When the 'theys' go away and the 'we' shows up, people's awareness and capabilities change."³⁰

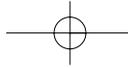
Much in society is like the dysfunctional carmaking system. It's not that we need more instruction from the top about what to do; we need more leadership from the bottom about how we can work together to transform the whole into which the parts fit.

*Opportunity 3: The Economic Myth, If Seen as Myth,
Allows for the Continual Re-Creation of Possibility*

The economic myth is a myth in the sense that it is a context for values organized around a supreme value or "reality"—in this case, self-interest, whether "self" is defined as a solitary individual, a specific group, or ultimately, humanity as a whole. But unlike the hero myth, with its stories of representative individuals, or the religious myth, with its stories of fall and redemption, or the democratic myth, with its story of progress, the economic myth has no authoritative story. That means that instead of accepting one version of reality about who we are as a belief, we can hold this version self-consciously as a story—one of many we might create from the facts. We don't have to defend it against change. We can let it evolve as we tell it and live in the present that is created by the future we tell.

Approaching the story of who we are as a kind of fiction rather than as a belief is a form of humility. I once heard an astronomer say that we know only 4 percent of what is in the universe—75 percent of the universe is "dark energy," and 21 percent is "dark matter," and we don't know what either of those things is. We do know that every physical process takes place in a sea of energy with wavelengths that are miles across. We are literally in touch with the universe—we are caught up in "quantum interconnectedness." It has been said that all things are so interconnected that the real question is, why do they look different?

If we could answer that question, we might see our economic interconnectedness as the material representation of the net of the Hindu god



Indra, in which every node of the net has a multifaceted jewel and every facet reflects all the other facets of all the other jewels. Imagine, then, if that net were the conduit not just of commerce and communication but also of love.

The economic myth itself is a similar act of the imagination in that it is a metaphor, a way of thinking, that brings to light the interconnectedness of the problems our society and the global community face and the possible solutions toward which we must move. The stories we tell ourselves about who we are and what is possible are extremely important. We need to tell better stories than we're telling now. For example, if we choose, we can declare this to be a time like the time when our nation was founded, an amazing opportunity, right now, at this moment in history.

Thomas Paine expressed the feeling of possibility in his time, and some would say that Paine's expression of possibility, in his 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense*, was what made coherent the ideas that resulted in the American Revolution. His expression of possibility created the feeling that led to conviction and thus to the possibility itself, as embodied in the Declaration of Independence and ultimately in a new form of government expressed in the Constitution. Paine declared, "We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand."

In the case of the economic myth, the new world is not the United States but that blue pearl of the earth as seen from space—the first view of the whole we have ever seen, an image now so familiar in all parts of the globe that it has profoundly influenced our story about who we are, especially in relation to the environment. Schoolchildren around the world take daily measurements of air and water quality and send their numbers to centralized computers for scientific analysis. This picture and these numbers suggest a story about self-interest, the driving force of the economic myth, which is more complex and interconnected than any story we've ever told before as human beings. How well we tell this first truly global myth—the economic myth—will determine the future of the American dream.

Notes

- 1 Margot Adler, *Weekend Edition*, National Public Radio, April 24, 2004.
- 2 This is my friend Chuck Spezzano's way of wording the victim story.
- 3 "Expert Opinion," *AerLingus Magazine*, July-August 1998, p. 66.
- 4 See Huston Smith, "Hinduism," in *The World's Religions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), pp. 12–81.
- 5 *Random House Dictionary*, def. 3.
- 6 Some of the ideas regarding the four myths have appeared in a different form in a privately printed monograph—Betty Sue Flowers, *The Economic Myth* (Austin: Center for International Business Education and Research, Graduate School of Business, University of Texas, 1995).
- 7 John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (1873), ch. 5.
- 8 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1949).
- 9 For a brilliant exposition of the role of the community in the heroic culture of Greece, see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
- 10 Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, ed. Betty Sue Flowers (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 25.
- 11 See "Text of Address by Alexander Solzhenitsyn at Harvard Class Day Afternoon Exercises, Thursday, June 8, 1978," <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/arch/solzhenitsyn/harvard1978.html>.
- 12 Steven Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes: A Modern View of the Origin of the Universe* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), p. 154.

- 13 Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, pp. 95–96.
- 14 Oscar Wilde defined a cynic as someone who knew “the price of everything and the value of nothing” in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892), act 3.
- 15 W. H. Auden, “The Shield of Achilles,” in *The Shield of Achilles*, published by Random House. Copyright © 1955 by W. H. Auden, renewed by the Estate of W. H. Auden. Used by permission of Curtis Brown, Ltd.
- 16 Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985), pp. 3–4.
- 17 Matthew 25:34–40 (New English Bible).
- 18 Luke 18:18–19 (New English Bible).
- 19 Abraham Maslow introduced his hierarchy of needs—rising from psychological and survival needs to the need for safety to the need for love and belonging to the need for esteem and ultimately to the need for self-actualization—in *A Theory of Human Motivation* (1943) and expanded it in *Motivation and Personality* (New York: HarperCollins, 1954).
- 20 Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, pp. 117–118.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 153–154.
- 22 “His disciples said to him, ‘When will the kingdom come?’
‘It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, “Look, here!” or “Look, there!” Rather, the Father’s kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people don’t see it.’” Gospel of Thomas 113, trans. Stephen Patterson and Marvin Meyer, in *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version* (Santa Rosa, Calif.: Polebridge Press, 1994).
- 23 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribner, 1958), p. 109.
- 24 Luke 6:28–29 (New English Bible).
- 25 Of the many versions of this story, I’m using the one Joseph Campbell told in *The Power of Myth*, pp. 197–198.
- 26 Psalm 23:4 (King James Bible).
- 27 Herbert Spencer, *First Principles of a New System of Philosophy* (1867), ch. 16, para. 138.
- 28 Ruzaburo Kaku, quoted in Royal Dutch/Shell Group, *Shell Global Scenarios, 1992–2020* (The Hague, Netherlands: Royal Dutch/Shell Group, 1993), p. 9.
- 29 See, for example, Michael Rothschild, *Bionomics: Economy as Ecosystem*, rev. ed. (New York: Holt, 1995).

- 30 Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers, *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), p. 45. This project is described in detail in George Roth and Art Kleiner, *Car Launch: The Human Side of Managing Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).