The American Dream: A Can of Coke and a Lexus
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In her English 10001 class, Dr. Jeannette E. Riley asked her students to respond to various class readings. In this essay, "The American Dream: A Can of Coke and a Lexus," Brenda Ayers-Rodgers explains how the media shapes our behavior and self-image, so we will feel accepted and privileged in our society. In the end, she argues that we need to teach our children to question societal beliefs and structures in order to learn and grow.

Following the crowd in 2001 is the American way. Our lives have been infected with directions on who, how, and what we should be and do. Every day our televisions blare out talk shows, sitcoms, and soap operas to stagnate our minds. Our radios scream obscenities and false hopes with a beat that permeates our thoughts. Magazines, newspapers, billboards, televisions, and radios continually tell us what we need and want. Fashion dictates the way we dress, what styles we wear, and even the food we eat. We must follow rigid exercise routines in expensive gymnasiums, drive only the best automobiles, and buy only certain brands of products for our families to consume. The media constantly inundates our subconscious with messages that instruct us how to behave, what to say, and gives directions on what is necessary to be accepted in the elite privileged society that we perceive to be the American dream. This is the education we get from the world around us.

Where has this propaganda come from? Why are we not able to see the forest for the trees? Why do we accept all that is handed to us without questioning the motives? We have been led to believe that "they" are always right. We have been taught to fear our own judgment, to accept life without question. Such programming begins at birth, is exemplified by our elementary education, and snowballs as we continue to learn. We are a society of sheep, waiting for slaughter.

Paulo Freire describes this kind of education in his essay "The Banking Concept of Education" as:

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositaries, and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. (349)

Schooling in American society has become a process of transferring a pre-arranged amount of information to our children. It begins around age five and continues through the late teens, or until the students have successfully completed the courses required of them. Teachers force-feed a curriculum determined by the state, the county school board, and the school itself. Children attend classes a specified number of days, accept a certain amount of data, and are tested regularly to determine that an acceptable amount of material has been retained. Our children’s teachers have been certified by the state, selected by the school board, and lesson plans follow a pre-set schedule arranged by them. The children’s requirement is to present themselves in a proper, sophisticated manner, prepared to absorb their quota for each day. By age eighteen most human thought processes have developed visible routes through our brains. These routes, once paved into our gray matter, are very easy to follow but nearly impossible to change. Most people continue following the path of least resistance. The well-trodden paths remain active;
those seldom traveled soon become grass-covered and hard to find, thus causing us to lose information that has not been used. We easily forget anything not repeated frequently enough.

While the concept that Freire presents in his essay is accepted as common practice and a necessary tool used to properly educate our youth, it also encourages submissive behavior. Freire explains this in his work by saying:

The more the students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them (350).

In examining Walker Percy’s essay, “The Loss of the Creature,” we see how this pre-packaged material called education limits our ability to think for ourselves. Like taking a packaged tour to the Grand Canyon, going on a pre-arranged vacation to Cuernavaca, or dissecting a dogfish in biology class, we are accepting someone else’s plan. Everything is neatly set up: the activities, the sights, and the itinerary. Even when we venture out and find something wonderful, as did the couple traveling through Mexico, we are afraid to trust our feelings. We must have someone else validate our feelings by giving a stamp of approval. How then, can we balance our education so that we learn the necessary facts without losing ourselves in the process? Is there a way to teach our youth without condemning them to a life of slavery, always doing or saying what is expected of them, wearing what everyone else does, and eating only the cereal advertised on television?

When we learn not to accept everything at face value, when we question why or how, we can begin to develop other paths. These new paths will allow us to search for tributaries, enable us to develop entire new maps, to challenge other ideas. In order to accomplish this feat, we must look at more complex ways in which we learn. In Percy’s essay we read about “getting off the beaten track” (566). Here, Percy uses the example of camping out in the back-country, getting up early, and approaching the South Rim of the Grand Canyon in order to see wild terrain where there are no trails or railed-in lookoutos. This scene represents the idea of consciously searching out routes from which you can gain new perspective. He urges readers to explore different avenues, to look for something different than the average person sees. Percy succeeds in teaching the concept of “problem-posing” education through his examples.

In the essay “Achievement of Desire,” by Richard Rodriguez, we see a living example of how the banking concept can affect our youth. Mr. Rodriguez shares the story of his education, his desire to possess it, his struggle to achieve it, and his disappointment in finding that in gaining it, he had lost something even more valuable. His saga is a detailed account of how he single-handedly forced education upon himself in order to attain status. Coming from a poor Mexican family, he longed to be like his teachers. He worked hard to lose his Spanish accent and was proud when teachers praised him for this accomplishment. He did not see the loss of his heritage. Solitude was the answer to his inability to focus on his studies in the family setting, so he withdrew from his family. While Mr. and Mrs. Rodriguez were always there to celebrate his victories, taking pictures and telling of their pride in his accomplishments, he felt shame in their lack of education. He soon lost track of his identity, his heritage, and his past. His teachers had become his only living contact with the world.

After years of exile, the day came when Richard began to notice the people around him. They all seemed so distant. How long had it been since he had felt the warmth of human love? He feared expressing emotion in his work because it felt foreign, unknown. His essay tells of his realization.

Not until my last months as a graduate student, nearly thirty years old, was it possible for me to think much about the reasons for my academic success. Only then. At the end of my schooling, I needed to determine how far I had moved from my past. The adult finally
confronted, and now must publicly say, what the child shuddered from knowing and could never admit to himself or to those many faces that smiled at his every success. (Your parents must be very proud….) (623).

Richard had lost “the creature.” He knew it was time to go home.

Richard’s story lends credence to the theories that Percy’s essay described. Living someone else’s plan causes one to lose sovereignty over life. By accepting everything we are given, told, and sold, we are giving up our individuality. Once lost it is nearly impossible to regain. Going with the crowd seems much easier than stepping out on our own. What if someone makes fun of us because we have not dressed in the proper clothing for this season? What if our friends accidentally catch us driving the old car, or the mini van? Can I wear this color now or must I wait until June? Perhaps I should ask a friend to validate because I do not want anyone to laugh at me.

We teach our children to go with the grain. We allow them freedoms unheard of in our parents’ day. They go out when they please, with anyone they want. We have no family night around the radio, no board games, no curfew, no rules. When teens get into trouble at school we testify to their honesty without question. We bail them out time after time. The youth of our nation suffer corruption brought on from lack of love and guidance. Babysitters don’t teach morals. Children learn to believe all outside sources of information, but little from parents who work two jobs, socialize with friends away from home, and think quality time consists of two hours in front of the television watching a rented video and eating pizza. Now is the time to stop the cycle.

We must stand up to our society and scream. “Wake up America! Let us live! Teach us to find ourselves, give back our dignity, and save us from ignorance. Give us back our nation, so we can hand it to our youth without fear of destruction. Teach us now, enable us to teach them.” Education is what distinguishes America from other nations, and lack of education will bring us to our knees. Controlling what is taught, how it is taught, and when it is taught, is sealing our fate as ignorant people with no reasoning power. We are urged to follow the crowd, swindled into selling our souls to buy trinkets, and to pay for all of it with the youth of America. We must regain our personal sovereignty before we can regain our nation, and complete education is the key to our success.

As parents we must take the first step in teaching our youth the morals on which our American society was once built. It is our duty to see that young minds find challenging programs on television and listen to music that gives peace. We must give them literature that will encourage questioning and examining its content. Mothers must take the time to read to babies. Fathers must show sons how to lead the family by leading them. Parents must give children rules and teach them to abide by them. People need to stop and think about how we spend time and money. As employers we must treat our workers with dignity, and understand that sometimes their families must come first. As consumers we must become thrifty. The United States of America, the greatest nation in the world, has become a dumping ground of lazy, uneducated, greedy, jealous people who respect no one, love no one, and give nothing but grief. Children learn first from example. It is time that the example we set is one of intelligent loving adults who are willing to share both time and resources with our fellow man no matter how much it hurts.

Works Cited

