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AEL Collegiate Essay

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My American Dream, My American Exceptionalism

I am in attendance to a private institution in Houston, Texas. My school self-identifies as “pluralistic” and “liberal”. Thus, when the Parkland shooting occurred, my school felt the need to engage in the subsequent Never Again Movement that arose. Several students were taken by teachers to the March for Our Lives in Washington, D.C. (including myself). While our attendance to this march was meaningful and helped support the need for a large population of protestors at the event, I felt that this was not the best route to create change on an individual level- how can students find their own voice in a crowd of thousands? With these ideas in mind, I set out to use the now mainstream rhetoric of student-lead action to incite change.

I anonymously put up several sheets of paper in two of the girls bathrooms with one-sided sticky tape that I found in the junk drawer of my house. I printed the posters on plain, white printer paper using black text. The posters included information regarding the dates for school walkouts to protest gun violence, how to contact local government representatives, and how to educate oneself on the amount of money the NRA gives to political organizations during election season (spoiler alert: it’s a lot). The posters contained no foul language or call to overthrow pro-gun politicians, but merely suggested more accessible ways for teenagers to interact with the movement on a personal level.

I read the student handbook in detail, which did not have any rules against such action. Yet the school still took issue with my activism. ​The school staff (the two teachers who lead my school’s march on Washington) said the following with regards to my posters in a large classroom setting- “it puts us in a bad position as a school, we don’t know who is doing it but we can think of a few names”.  Which created anxiety in me, because activism should not be something that someone should be punished for, and I felt it was unfair that teachers preaching social action would approach student activism in such a way. The same day, the administrative staff removed all of my posters from the bathrooms and met with teachers in private regarding my posters. It hurt me when I went into the bathrooms and saw that my posters had been ripped from the stall doors, fragments still remaining under crumpled tape. It made me feel defeated, but soon that feeling was replaced by an emotion of frustration. Frustration at the irony of the circumstances: a school advertising their proactive attitude regarding preventing gun violence but whom removed an appropriate student-lead effort to stop such violence.

To me, this situation harkens back to MLK Junior's words of the white moderate in his Letter From Birmingham Jail, **"**First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate...the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action;" who paternalistically feels he can set the timetable for another man's freedom". The school I attend, in this particular instance, seemed more devoted to "order" than to justice; the posters were not school-sanctioned, so they had to be removed, the school supports gun control, but only on their own time. This is the "convenient activism" MLK Junior writes about. Halting direct action on the part of the demographic dying due to guns is the negative peace, the absence of tension which they prefer.

On the AEL Collegiate Essay Contest page, it reads, “The mission of AEL is in its strong belief in "American exceptionalism", i.e., that our country is exceptional in the history of the world. All of our programs are meant to encourage students to learn about, understand and appreciate some aspect of the American experience. Educating our youth about basic American values, history and institutions is the best way to protect the American dream for all of our people.”

Given my experience with my school, I must ask myself, what is this “American dream”? The American dream cannot be a singular concept, it must be more complex, more layered than just one simple idea. The American dream must have many forms, especially given the United States has 242 years of history behind it, entailing countless instances of different American experiences- the trials and tribulations, successes and wins of all kinds of people. There has to be more than one version of the American dream, of what different kinds of people saw to be the ultimate American ability, achievement, goal or way of life. Given this, I propose two versions of my own.

The first version of what I believe to be the American dream is as follows: Oppression disguised as social reform under an American authority. America was built on authority, on levels of power and the nuances of those levels. This is exemplified in the U.S. government, where federal power reigns first, state power second, and federal power can always override state power. Yes, America allows for activism, but only when that activism falls under the authority of the oppressor. Malcolm X was considered a terrorist by the United States government because he advocated for black power, which clashes with white power, and white people were (and are) the oppressor in that situation. Thus, because Malcolm X’s activism did not bow to the ultimate authority of white power, he was not able to pursue his activism. However, Martin Luther King Junior (in his early years as an activist) advocated for building bridges between white and black people; he did not fight for the overthrowing of an American structural system, but rather geared his activism towards the acceptance of white people. This explains why Martin Luther King Jr. is so accepted and celebrated by white individuals. I believe this to be a form of the American dream. The oppressed cannot pursue a dream that enforces the inherent structures that dehumanize them in the first place. Schools are the places where children are being shot, schools are places where administrators are considering arming teachers, schools are the places where activism is allowed, so long as change is not made. If the American dream is to take down my posters, to only be a revolutionary on one’s own clock, under the authority of structures and systems built to limit one, I cannot prescribe to such a dream. Thus, the American dream is a privilege, a luxury unavailable to those attempting to pursue social progression, specifically, to those working to prevent brutality in our country.

Another version of what the ‘dream’ could be might be what happened as a result of the short time my posters were up. Before they were removed, my posters received positive attention from students, which was my intention. Students were spreading the word in person and online on how to make a difference, using my posters as a guide. Some even advertised pictures of my posters via social media. So what is this small sliver of positive change that came out of my endeavor? Perhaps this is the true American dream: youth organizing and creating social change despite the objection of privatized institutions. Since the start of oppression in America, there has always been pushback to such marginalization and the violence that it entails. MLK Junior’s speech on that fateful day in 1963 references how his dream as an African-American was tied to the very essence of what I believe the American dream could be, “I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." Thus, the American dream may very well be overcoming the oppressive forces that have monopolized our country and prevented American peoples from pursuing their inherent rights as human beings. Maybe I pursued the American dream by making an effort to overcome the normalized gun violence in our country. Maybe my peers pursued the American dream by spreading news of my posters. Maybe I am continuing to pursue the American dream by writing this essay.

This leads me into American exceptionalism. American exceptionalism, to me, is the right to debate the American dream as a principal, as I have just done. American exceptionalism allows the people of the United States the unique ability to engage in intellectual discourse, which has been a pivotal trait of our country ever since our Founding Fathers found basis to present discourse to the British monarchy regarding the treatment of colonists abroad. American exceptionalism entailing the encouragement of logical discourse is something inherent to our country, as it is what we were intellectually built on. American exceptionalism allowed for a revolution in 1776, in 1963, and now again, will allow the youth of our nation to give rise to yet another major social and political change. Whatever the American dream may be, American exceptionalism will always entail the idea of rising up, even if that goes against what the ‘dream’ may be. Whether the American dream be taking down my posters or sharing them, American exceptionalism is the power that American high school students have to interact with and change their environment for the better.

Works Cited

King, Martin L., Jr. "I Have a Dream." Speech. Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D. C. 28 Aug. 1963

Martin Luther. “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” 16 Apr. 1963.

My brief biography:

I am biracial, Jewish and queer; all aspects of my identity that I drew from to write this essay. I do not believe that I would understand American Exceptionalism in the same way if I were not a member of a marginalized group. Being an oppressed youth in America allows me a unique perspective on this country. Furthermore, I am a social activist; I run a blog (BibleBeltFeminist.com) in which I describe my experiences as a feminist from Texas. For this blog I have interviewed famous social justice advocates such as third wave feminist Gloria Steinem (also a renowned author) and writer Sam Maggs. I am also politically inclined; I have canvassed door-to-door for the Democratic Party of Texas (Wendy Davis)  in effort to preserve the democracy of my local government. Additionally, I enjoy volunteering; I volunteer at preschools and religious schools, where I am allowed to explore my passion for teaching young minds. My volunteering is not only limited to schools, however, as after my city suffered Hurricane Harvey, I helped residents clean up and rebuild their houses/households. I am incredibly interest in journalism, and am an alumni of the School of the New York Times, a competitive program for budding journalists. I am currently spending my second summer at the School of the New York Times, where I have the opportunity to learn under Pulitzer Prize winning journalists; the application process for this program was highly selective. My writing has been published in the Jewish Herald Voice and I have been interviewed for KPRC Channel 2. I also enjoy music, and am enrolled in classical competitive piano (private lessons) and have won many awards through this; I competed in state wide competitions as well as more local ones. Furthermore, I was selected to represent my school at the 2017 Independent Schools Association of the Southwest (ISAS) Arts Festival, where I sang in a choir and performed a duet. My interests are not limited to liberal arts, I also enjoy science; I worked in a laboratory at UT Southwestern a few summers ago and this summer am working on a paleontological project at Rice University.