



Chapter 1

The American Dream: Has It Evolved?

The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.

—George Bernard Shaw

Everyone talks about the American Dream. What is it? The definition varies depending on whom you're talking to. Immigrants once came to America in search of more opportunity and prosperity and to escape oppression just as our founding fathers did. Today, immigrants still come to America for these reasons, and America is still one of the best places on the planet to achieve your dreams.

However, I think for many of us who grew up in America, the American Dream simply means going to college, having a family, owning a home, having a successful job or business, and having the ability to buy and own what you want. These are good goals and pursuits, but once they're realized, if you don't continually focus on what will make you happy—other than things or titles or money—you will likely find yourself feeling unfulfilled and stuck.

Many people follow the prescribed path: going to school, getting a professional job and a home, and having children. Such a path requires that we make decisions about our future while we're in school, with very little view into the professional world and what those roles are really like. We're encouraged to major in subjects that will "pay well" or are paths our parents think we should take, with little regard for our real talents and passions.

Things have changed dramatically in the last 25 years, and many times this prescription leads us to feeling unfulfilled and stressed out. The problem is focusing primarily on external things and status rather than finding out what will *really* make us happy. It's very difficult to break this cycle once you're in it; we're a country of consumers, and many of us are bound financially by mortgages, family obligations, and credit card debt.

Once you've met your needs and have the house, the job, and all the trappings of success, if you aren't doing something you're passionate about, you may find yourself acquiring more *stuff* to make you happy, and then you'll realize that there isn't enough stuff in the world to fill that void. What happens is that when all of our basic needs are met, we start looking for fulfillment and meaning in what we're doing. It's normal at that point to start asking yourself the bigger questions in life, such as:

- ☛ Why am I here?
- ☛ What's the point of my life?
- ☛ Do I have a purpose on this planet other than what I'm doing right now?
- ☛ How do I find meaning in what I'm doing?

When you start asking yourself these questions, they lead you to think you may need to make some changes in your life, and, let's face it: It's scary to make a big change. Especially when you don't *have* to. Your life is going along nicely, and you think you *should* be happy because you have the things that society says will *make* you happy. You ask yourself, *What's wrong with me? I have everything I ever wanted...I should be happy!*

I remember hitting my goals and thinking, *Is this all there is? Certainly, this isn't it?* It made me feel empty to realize that the VP title, the salary, and the perks really weren't all that great after all. It was satisfying to reach the goal, but after that it held no real value for me. I wasn't fulfilled by my work; in fact, I was working more than ever and under much more pressure to perform. But when you've spent years in one direction, it's hard to make a course correction. It's like an aircraft carrier trying to make a U-turn!

Many people feel afraid to make necessary changes toward growth because they feel psychological or economical roadblocks. When you've been in a career or job for a long time, it's difficult to even contemplate what it would take to extract yourself from it. The forward momentum is so strong that it's hard to put on the brakes and slow down in order to discover a new route.

Some people don't get to choose when they want to slow down, and are given a "hard stop." Lurline Craig-Burke, whom I interviewed prior to getting the Airstream, is one such person. She got a hard stop when she found out she had an aggressive form of breast cancer at age 37. At the time she was a very successful executive who, ironically, was in the middle of a multi-million-dollar health plan turnaround. She was working long hours and had a lot of forward momentum in her life—in a direction that wasn't necessarily the right path for her. She had also just remarried, blending a family of four children, and had just had a baby. Here's what she said about this time in her life:

I really didn't have my priorities in order. I was trying to do what I thought was expected of me: get an MBA, have a great job, be a great mother with great children who are excellent—then everything is perfect. I had all the external successes and thought this is the dream; this is what we're supposed to be doing, right? I was working 15-hour days and weekends, drinking a Diet Coke for lunch, and wishing for a 24-hour daycare for executive moms!

At age 37 I found a lump in my breast and went to the doctor to have it checked out. The radiologist said it was nothing and to come back in three months to have it checked

again. She said she didn't think it was anything and that I didn't need to do anything about it right now. It was strange because I didn't think that I would be at risk for breast cancer at age 37, having never smoked, and not having a history of it in my family. It wasn't even on my radar.

There was something deep inside me that told me I needed it to have it checked out [further]. I kept pushing my doctors until they agreed for me to have a biopsy. When we found out it was one of the most aggressive forms of cancers, every pathology report that came back was always the worst news it could be. Those first couple of days after hearing you have cancer are a living nightmare; it's like a constant hum ringing in your head.

I remember a conversation that was a huge turning point for me. My oncologist gave me a 17 percent chance of surviving the next five years. When she told me that statistic, I felt like I had been punched in the stomach. I picked my head up and looked deeply into her eyes and asked her, "Do you have a 100 percent chance of waking up tomorrow?" She reached for my hand and held it tight, and that day we silently agreed not to talk about statistics again.

I decided to set my life up differently by first setting boundaries at work about my time. I realized that I had been killing myself inside the companies I worked for to build their brand, so eventually I decided to start my own company and create my own brand. I'm no longer defined by money and status; I'm now defined by being true to myself. Learning to surrender has been really freeing, and has opened me up more than I imagined.

I've been 100 percent cancer-free for the last five years. It was a tough road: eight surgeries, eight rounds of chemotherapy, and 36 rounds of radiation. Fast-forward to five years later, and I now have things in my life that are truly great. Less regimen, more flexibility. Less spending, more saving. Less climbing, more walking.

Now, I'm open to all of the exciting possibilities in my life and I'm clear about how to get there. From my experience, I learned that the greatest gift you can give yourself is to surrender. It is the hardest word to hear and an even harder thing to do, but when you do you will open up to amazing journeys you never thought possible, even volunteering at school like all the other moms.

Today, Lurline is living a much happier, more fulfilling life built on her own terms. She now has more time to spend with her family, and she's enjoying being at the bus stop in the afternoons to meet the kids. She said she's enjoying the moment and is also excited about what the future holds because she's creating it one day at a time.

Lurline took her hard stop and turned it into something good for her and her family. Sometimes we're so in the mix of it we can't even see what we're doing to ourselves. The pressure is so great to be successful and to perform well for the company that we get wrapped up in it and lose ourselves in the process.

Dr. Kathleen Hall, whom we interviewed while on the road, is another example of someone who found her way out and is now leading a life that is fulfilled and happy. She worked on Wall Street as a broker in the 1980s when there were very few women in that world. An anxiety attack in an elevator led her to make sweeping changes in her life. She went from being a Wall Street broker to living in the woods, and getting her doctorate in spirituality, and now she runs The Stress Institute, as well as recently launching the Mindful Living Network, an online reality show where she helps people deal with the stresses of life. In her own words:

I was working for a Wall Street firm as a broker. I was successful and had all the trappings, but I hated my life professionally. I was beginning to feel extreme anxiety, and I kept telling myself, "But I've invested all this time and money in education, I can't just walk away from what I've worked so hard to build." I kept negotiating when I was going to leave and how I was going to leave. But then the panic attacks were getting stronger and stronger. I had gotten licensed in

everything, and that had taken a lot of time, money, and energy. My practice was successful, and I was good and confident at what I did. I had begun to realize that money wasn't enough and the clients weren't as interesting anymore.

The anxiety grew and I became more and more unhappy. I kept telling myself, "But I've invested all these years in education...." That's why people won't change: because they've put so much into it. But it's really a trap. Then one day I had a full-on panic attack, and I realized I hadn't been paying attention to my stress. I was angry that I'd spent all my time building this practice, making money, and I had a wonderful husband who is a physician, and two beautiful kids, and I pretty much loathed every single part of my life professionally.

At the time, I was reading some of Henry David Thoreau's work, and this quote really struck me: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

After I read that quote I burst out crying and asked myself, Why am I living my life this way? As I read more about the existential and transcendental movement it caused me to ask myself some really tough questions. I wanted to ferret out what my life meant.

What I've found from very enlightened people is that, instead of running from fear, they danced with it, embracing it. They found there was amazing information in our fears and that it was the path to greatness. I decided to write down the 10 things I was most afraid of. Some of them were being alone, not having status, not being intelligent, or [not] owning a room when I walked into it. I realized I had built a whole life around my fears.

So, I decided to make a big change. I walked away from my job in New York and bought a cabin on 100 acres in the North Georgia mountains an hour outside of Atlanta. I spent

a year facing my fears and working on the property, and then decided to go back to school and got a masters in divinity and then a doctorate in spirituality. I have had the pleasure of studying with medical pioneers, including Dr. Dean Ornish of the Preventive Medicine Research Institute and Dr. Herbert Benson at the Harvard Mind/Body Institute, as well as illustrious Nobel Peace Prize recipients including the Dalai Lama, Bishop Desmond Tutu, and President Jimmy Carter.

The prescription for life has become so fixed, we don't even question it anymore. We go through our days blindly following a road carved by others rather than setting out to find our own destinies. Many of us have become stuck in a system that is no longer serving us.

We grow up being told that in order to be successful we must go to school, get a good education, and major in something that will pay us well so we can buy a house and have kids, put money in a 401(K), and retire well. The truth is that this thinking doesn't lead to happiness or fulfillment, and who knows if we'll live to retirement age anyway?

The following passage is from Paulo Coehlo's book *The Zahir*. I think it illustrates what many people fall into and have a hard time getting out of.

You'll grow only half as much as you could have grown, and certainly not as much as you would have liked to. At a certain point, your life will begin to decline, you got halfway, but not all the way, you are half-happy and half-sad, neither frustrated nor fulfilled. You're neither cold nor hot, you're lukewarm, and as an evangelist in some holy book says: "Lukewarm things are not pleasing to the palate."

This is what I was trying to avoid when I set out on my journey and what I think many people hope to avoid. I woke up one day realizing that if I stayed on the path I was on I would be only half-way there, not really experiencing life to the fullest and exploring possibilities for what my life could be. I didn't want to wake up one day and realize I had given up on my dreams and not lived full-out.

I hope to die completely worn out from giving life everything I have and experiencing as much as possible on as many levels as I can find. My dad once told me, “Life is worth living.” I totally agree, but for me it has to be on my own terms.

Many people choose their majors in college because their parents or friends thought it would be a good way to make a living, rather than because it was something they were passionate about or had talent for. They then graduate from college and go out into the world to get a job that often isn’t what they thought it would be.

I’ve talked to a lot of 20-somethings recently who are absolutely appalled by the way most people work. They say, “I can’t believe people go to this office and sit in a gray cube all day on a computer, and then sit in traffic for an hour to get home.” It really is appalling, and it’s completely against our nature. Once I stepped outside of my corporate job I felt a guilty freedom that was amazing and weird at the same time. Why did I feel guilty? I know I’m not alone in this feeling. I had been trained to work during the same hours every day and to feel that the entire day needed to be spent on work. Why is that? Who came up with that plan?

We’re brought up with a work ethic that just isn’t sustainable or life-giving. It’s downright unhealthy. When I was working for corporations, I felt that I needed to be available 24/7 and answer e-mail up until midnight if I was going to be like my counterparts and succeed. I remember staying late at the office because my counterparts were staying late, and if I wanted to be viewed as a high performer I felt I must also stay, even if I didn’t have anything pressing to do. That’s just plain crazy!

Living this way is not carving your own road; it’s following the path that was laid by others and is no longer working. In fact, it’s crumbling beneath our feet. It’s time to make a change, not only for us but also for our children and grandchildren. It’s time to set the example for how to live a fulfilling, happy life, while making a living *and* doing something meaningful.

Carving your own road is about creating a path that is uniquely yours; if you choose this path, your life will be rich with expansion

and possibility, intense emotions, and experiences. What this means is working and living your life on your own terms. Yes, it is possible! During the course of research for this book, we met many people who have done this successfully and are continuing to do so.

You don't have to become an entrepreneur and start your own company; you can find a way to create your terms inside the corporate structure as well. We have talked to people from all walks of life who found out how to live and work on their own terms in varying degrees and circumstances.

It's time for us to stand up and take our lives back, to make choices that serve us and our families in order to live in a way that is inspired and meaningful. We need to set new examples for how to live with the technology that is available to us and create a way to integrate our desires and dreams with our work.

We've found that people who live their lives this way are happier and much more excited about what is going on around them. It's definitely not an easy path, but it is much more fulfilling. Living and working on your own terms is a constant balancing act and a continual evolution and expansion of who you are. If you choose to live this way, you will experience life to the fullest. Every day won't be perfect, but you will feel more alive than you've ever felt.

What Does Living and Working on Your Own Terms Mean? The Table 39 Accord

Shortly after the idea for this book was conceived, Joe I and I went to dinner at one of our favorite restaurants in Atlanta, called Feast. We were seated at our favorite table in the corner, Table 39. We were having a great dinner and started to define what we were embarking on and what this project meant to us. At the time, we had coined the project "Operation Freedom."

We were having a discussion about what freedom meant to us. We had been having many conversations about how wrapped up in our work we had been in the past and the impact it had had on our lives.

Joe had been an architect for a large architecture firm, and was driven to do great work. The culture at that firm, as in many architecture firms, requires you to work long hours in order to work on the good projects and to be respected by the leadership of the firm. Working long hours is a rite of passage for most architects; it starts in college, where they pull all-nighters working on a project or thesis, and continues on into their professional lives.

For the first nine years of our marriage, Joe worked extremely long hours and weekends, and he was successful, regularly getting promotions and accolades. On Saturday mornings he arose just as he did on Mondays to get to the office. I teased him that he was like the Dunkin' Donuts commercial in which the guy would roll out of bed half-asleep and say, "Time to make the donuts...." He was at a point at which he felt compelled to be at work all the time because he believed that was what was required of him to be successful. In truth, if he wanted to be successful at that firm, it was a requirement.

I was not immune to the pull of corporate success either. My goals were clearly about climbing the corporate ladder to status and money, thinking that would make me happy. During those years I had shut myself off to really living my life, and I was so focused and stressed out by work that there was little I could enjoy. Joe also teased me and called me "1999 Jennifer" during those years. In 1999, he had told me once that I needed to have a hobby or something as a release, and I jumped all over him, telling him he didn't know what he was talking about. I guess he it a nerve! In 1999, I was at the height of being the corporate bitch, clawing my way up the ladder and trying to skip rungs. I'm still not sure why, or what was driving me. I was just certain that this was what I was "supposed" to do.

So, as we were discussing this at dinner and reflecting on our professional lives and being the "Dunkin Donuts Guy" and "1999 Jennifer," we wrote down on a cocktail napkin what this meant to us:

What is this project about? Freedom. It's about living a life today that is yours. Freedom occurs whenever you choose; it happens every morning on the drive to work, while you're at work, and every evening at dinner—we are all free to be and do what we truly enjoy.

Freedom is:

- ☞ Doing what you want; not being at work, but “being” your work.
- ☞ Not living for retirement but living every day doing what you love.
- ☞ Creating a reality that is your own, not dictated by other people telling you what is real.
- ☞ A productive connection to your work from anywhere, allowing inspiration to happen without the constraint of a 9-to-5.
- ☞ Contagious.
- ☞ Craved by all of us.
- ☞ Achievable.

Freedom to think leads to incredible productivity, creativity, and success that is hard to achieve while at “work.”

It seems to me that many of us have lost our way, and we’re not living an American Dream. “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” is one of the most famous phrases in the Declaration of Independence. We’ve gotten pretty far away from that in the last 25 years. It seems many of us have been mostly focused on achieving material success first, and hoping that this will lead to happiness. It doesn’t work that way; material success doesn’t lead to happiness. It might lead to short-term contentment, but not in any real meaningful sense.

When you get a new car, you’re very excited and happy for a few weeks, and then it wears off and you start looking for something new in order to fill that void, such as a big-screen TV or some expensive shoes—you get the picture. My big thing was planning a trip; when I started to feel empty I would surf the Internet for hours planning a trip to look forward to and fill that empty void.

However, I should mention that I’m incredibly grateful for my corporate experience and believe that corporations play a significant role in the economy, in innovation and growth, as well as offering tremendous opportunities for people. What I’m talking about

here is not about bashing corporations; it's about us not allowing the job or career to take over our lives any longer. It's about being able to pursue your happiness and dreams on your own terms and to live a full life today, not waiting for retirement. It's about being mindful and intentional about what you want to do and setting boundaries at work in order to do it.

The key is deciding what you want, getting incredible clarity about it, and pursuing it with vigor. You can achieve what you want within a corporate structure, by starting your own company, or by changing careers. It's completely up to you! There are stories of people throughout this book just like you and me who are in pursuit of their dreams and are living fulfilling lives right now. They've taken the leap to being in control of their destinies and owning their choices just as Joe and I did a few years ago.

To me, living and working on your own terms is what the American Dream is about. We live in a country where opportunities abound, and we really can be, do, or have anything we want. It's a shame to let that go to waste! What we've found from the numerous people we interviewed and from our own personal experiences is that when happiness and fulfillment are the pursuit, rather than material success or status, the rest of it falls into place. You may have to make some short-term sacrifices, but it's worth it!

The Physiological Reason for Finding Career Happiness

The workplace is a big contributor to sustained stress these days, with the pace of change, new technology, and the boundaries between work and life becoming blurred. Stress-related diseases and deaths are on the rise, and it's more important than ever to evaluate what you're doing and the effect it has on you.

Stress can cause health problems when a person is faced with continuous challenges without relief. This type of stress can lead to physical symptoms and disease. There are many things at work that can contribute to this type of prolonged stress:

- # Disliking your work and working for a difficult boss whom you can't please no matter what you do.
- # Fear of losing your job due to a merger, acquisition, or downsizing.
- # Inability to have boundaries between work and family, putting pressure on your relationships.
- # Pressure to earn a certain income in order to make ends meet even though you don't enjoy what you're doing; the feeling of being stuck.
- # Continuous pressure to perform without any time for relaxation.
- # Knowing that there is work you could be doing that is meaningful, but can't see how you can pursue it, so you have a constant feeling of frustration.

According to WebMD:

- # 43 percent of all adults suffer adverse health effects from stress.
- # 75 to 90 percent of all doctor's office visits are for stress-related ailments and complaints.
- # Stress can play a part in problems such as headaches, high blood pressure, heart problems, diabetes, skin conditions, asthma, or arthritis, in addition to depression and anxiety.
- # The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) declared stress a hazard of the workplace.
- # Stress costs American industry more than \$300 billion annually.
- # The lifetime prevalence of an emotional disorder is more than 50 percent, often due to chronic, untreated stress reactions.

When you stay in a prolonged state of stress, your body will continuously secrete stress hormones. At this point, the body begins to experience stress with an extra burden due to the side effects of the persistently high stress hormones. You might exhibit some of these symptoms or conditions:

- # Chronic headache.
- # Mood swings.
- # Anxiety disorder.
- # Substance abuse.
- # Memory disturbances.
- # Heart attack due increased blood pressure, sugar, and cholesterol.
- # Stroke due to similar reasons.
- # Weight loss.
- # Exacerbation of allergies including asthma.
- # Irritable Bowel Syndrome.
- # Crohn's disease.
- # Decreased sexual drive.
- # Sleeplessness.

Sounds like fun, huh? I noticed that when I made the changes in my life to being focused on doing what I wanted to do and having a schedule that was more reasonable, my health issues disappeared. Many of the things I struggled with quite literally went away overnight. I had no idea that the symptoms and conditions I was experiencing were stress-related until they disappeared in my new lifestyle.

We spend most of our waking life at work or thinking about work. This presents a big problem when we're unhappy with what we're doing, and we feel stuck. The key is, you don't *have* to be stuck, and we will lay out a roadmap for making gradual changes in your life in order to live and work on your own terms!