

THE MYTH OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

D. L. MAYFIELD

REFLECTIONS ON
AFFLUENCE,
AUTONOMY,
SAFETY, AND POWER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR D. L. MAYFIELD'S ★

THE MYTH OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

INTRODUCTION

1. What does the American Dream mean to you? How have you pursued or resisted it in your own life?
2. D. L. Mayfield positions herself within White, middle-class evangelicalism among those who have benefitted from the way things are, who believe individuals are responsible for themselves (p. 3). Where are you positioned? How have you thought about privilege and responsibility?
3. “When people of privilege pursue affluence, autonomy, safety, and power above everything else, not only do they miss out on the liberating and restorative work of Jesus, but they participate in greater inequality, segregation, and suffering for the most marginalized people in their community,” Mayfield writes (p. 6). What do you think about this statement?
4. What are your dreams and pursuits? Discuss them in light of Mayfield’s argument above.



PART ONE: AFFLUENCE

1. Mayfield initially responded to the suffering of her neighbors “believing myself to have something to offer the poor and needy because I was born with more” (p. 12-13). She writes that it was a framework of charity, not righteousness. How do you understand the distinction between charity and righteousness? Discuss some examples of well-known organizations or work you have been involved in. How would they classify?
2. Describe your own neighborhood. Why do you live here? Who else lives here? If you were to get curious about the way the world works and our responsibilities to each other in it (p. 20), what questions would you have about your neighborhood?
3. “The people who most hate talking about money are the rich” (p. 20). How do you feel talking about money? How do you feel about the money you have (or don’t have)? When you think about your relative wealth, who are you comparing yourself to?
4. Mayfield asks, “What would good news for my lower-income neighbors feel like for me?” (p. 26). What kinds of developments would be good news for your lower-income neighbors? How would you feel about them?
5. Mayfield describes the Israelites’ forty years of desert wandering and how they relied on manna from heaven day-to-day. In contrast to a predatory, hoarding economy, the Israelites relearned “how to live together equally, no one taking more than their fair share” (p. 34). Have you ever struggled to survive to the point of wondering how you would eat the next day? How did that shape you? If you haven’t, how has having more than enough shaped you?

6. In your own upbringing, what value was placed on being financially safe and secure? Mayfield writes that financial security isn't a major concern in the Bible but unjust economic practices are (p. 39). What might change about how you live if you were more concerned about injustice than financial security? Is it possible to pursue financial security and still work to dismantle unjust economic practices?
7. Mayfield dreams of hosting a radio show that showcases stories of people who have tried very hard to make it in American society only to be thwarted by unjust systems and policies (p. 41). Tell stories of people you know who would be on that show.
8. Read Mayfield's definition of gentrification on page forty-seven (p. 47) ("Gentrification occurs when certain groups of people capitalize on ..."), and think about neighborhoods you know that are gentrifying. Who is being pushed out? Who is moving in? What questions and feelings do you have about what is going on?
9. What feelings have come up as you've read this section on affluence? How has it challenged your own perspective on money?
10. Mayfield writes that the antidote to affluence is not shame but thanksgiving (p. 54). She imagines that Jesus would laugh at her friend Ayana's gift of the fart toy and eat multiple helpings of her friend's cooking. "He would celebrate with those who had hard stories, as an act of resistance in an empire of scarcity" (p. 57). What are you thankful for? What is one practical way you could resist the empire of scarcity?



PART TWO: AUTONOMY

1. Pursuing the American Dream of autonomy, "the right to act, speak, live, or govern as you want without restraint" makes us lonely, isolated, and unable to listen to our marginalized neighbors, Mayfield writes (p. 63-64). How does pursuing autonomy make us lonely? Can you give some examples from personal experience?
2. Mayfield makes a distinction between the imprisoned who rightly desire freedom and those who are already free making an idol out of liberty (p. 64). How are these two things different? How is Jesus' proclamation of freedom for the captives (Luke 4:18) different from the American Dream of autonomy? At what point does the desire to decide for yourself become an idol?
3. When Mayfield and her husband buy a small, fuel-efficient car, her friend Maryan said, "What, did you not think of us when you bought this car? . . . For someone with a big heart, . . . you sure do like small cars" (p. 66). How would you react if a friend said this to you?
4. Those who are obsessed with freedom can only learn a new way of living by taking the time to be connected to the real teachers, our neighbors: "The ones who feed us from the deep wells of their own experience," Mayfield writes (p. 73). Who are your teachers when it comes to learning alternatives to the American Dream? What have they taught you?
5. Mayfield tells the story of a church group coming to repaint her neighborhood school and asks, "What exactly does it mean to love a neighborhood, to adopt it, to help it, to fix it, when you wouldn't actually ever move into it?" (p. 77). How does her question challenge your own helping work or the work of your church?

6. Mayfield writes that it can be hard to love our neighbors when our lives are oriented around loving ourselves and our own and giving our children what we believe is best (p. 77). How is our responsibility to care for our immediate family related to our responsibility to care for our neighbors? How can we do both well, without neglecting one or the other?
7. Decisions that privileged parents make about their children's education often boil down to "actions that prioritize individual benefits over the collective flourishing of a community" (p. 77). If you are a parent, what considerations have you weighed in making decisions about your kids' schooling? How have you wrestled with the pressure to get ahead versus the call to invest in your community? What conclusions have you come to?
8. Mayfield offers some challenging definitions of love: "A concrete way of living in the world that prioritizes others, and other people's children, over our own" (p. 80) and "[loving] the people who are the most estranged from us" (p. 90). What would it look like for you to put these definitions into practice?
9. The antidote to autonomy, Mayfield writes, is interdependence. "We found there is immense safety in community, in knowing people. And the opposite is also true: fear laces all of our privacy and autonomy, a fear that comes from being estranged from the people in our neighborhoods" (p. 93). How can you cultivate interdependence where you live?



PART THREE: SAFETY

1. We often have fears disproportionate to the actual risks (p. 97). Share some of your own biggest fears. What are the chances they would actually happen?
2. Throughout this section Mayfield contrasts safety against true peace. She quotes the poet Padraig O'Tuama, who says, "Peace that comes through the annihilation of the enemy is no peace at all" (p. 100). How are peace and safety different?
3. Mayfield confesses that even she succumbs to fear: "Wouldn't my life be better, simpler, and easier if everyone who hated my beloved neighbors simply didn't exist anymore?" (p. 101). Can you relate to this sentiment? How have you handled your fears of those who think differently than you?
4. "We can uproot the seeds of hateful eradication within our own hearts while still holding power accountable and still demanding true righteousness, which is justice for the oppressed" (p. 102). Can you name examples of people or groups who have done both things this well? What practices might you learn from them?
5. Mayfield highlights vaccinations as an example of something some privileged people have opted out of because they can't stomach the small risks (p. 105-6). How is not vaccinating a way of keeping up the illusion of safety and control? What are other ways that we keep up that illusion?
6. In the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mayfield finds consolation and a model for opening up to the "terror of love" and joining with God, "the one who is always being split wide open by joy and lament" (p. 110). If you are a parent, what fears do you have about your children? How does the story of Mary speak to you?

7. Mayfield writes about the harsh reality of the current refugee crisis and how the US refugee resettlement program has been dismantled in recent years (p. 111-17). How have you processed and responded to the stories and images of the refugee crisis?
8. Discuss the question Mayfield asks herself, “If the tables were turned—if we had been born on the other side of the world, into a different family, religion, race, economic situation—what would we want?” (p. 122). How does the thought that you could have been born into a completely different situation change how you understand your place in the world, how you hold your own privileges?
9. Mayfield wants her children “to focus not so much on going out into the world and making disciples, but flipping the narrative on its head: to joyfully welcome the world as it shifts and moves ever forward, bringing into our cities and neighborhoods and homes the chance to be disciplined together as a community, as a global family, into the ways of Jesus” (p. 124-25). What do you think of this statement? How is welcoming the world and allowing our neighbors to disciple us a different posture than going out and making disciples of the world?
10. It is important, Mayfield writes, to reclaim the discipline of lament, which is different than despair or sadness (p. 131). What about this world makes you sad? How can you turn that sadness into lament?
11. While we work and long for the whole world to be made right, “in the meantime we will alternately fast and feast, we will be faithful to the festivals and the laments” (p. 131). Which of these comes easier for you—celebration or lament? How can you be more faithful in practicing the other discipline?
12. “Learning from nondominant cultures is crucial to understanding our longings for self-care as really being deeper desires for true peace,” Mayfield writes (p. 136). What situations bring up the need for self-care for you? Leaning into those raw places, what deeper desires can you name? How can you practice resilience and resurrection (p. 136-37) instead of numbing yourself to the realities of the world?



PART FOUR: POWER

1. The idea has been ingrained in Mayfield that White evangelical expressions of Christianity in America “cannot die because it is inherently blessed by God” (p. 145). What have you been taught about God’s favor on your own group?
2. How do you view the loss of cultural influence by White American evangelicals? What challenges and opportunities do you see?
3. “Those of us who have been influenced by Great Men and Great Books and Great Theology of the mostly Western civilization kind will be experiencing a death of sorts,” Mayfield writes (p. 147). Can you relate? How do you hold the tension of the good that has come from the “great” Western cultural tradition with the ways it has dehumanized and excluded large swaths of people?
4. “The world is changing, and we don’t have to be afraid,” Mayfield writes (p. 148). In what ways are you most aware that the world is changing? How do you feel about these changes?
5. Mayfield grew up on the Little House on the Prairie books. What images and stories do you have of the American pioneers? How do you see the pioneer mindset—the idea of taking, owning, and conquering (p. 156)—manifest in your own surroundings?

6. Mayfield absorbed “a persistent imperative to . . . return Christians in America to our former political, social, and cultural power, and to make America what is once was.” (p. 158). How does this narrative compare to what you were taught? How does it compare to what you believe is your call as a Christian in America now?
7. Citing Willie Jennings, Mayfield writes that the White European imagination upon coming to the new world was a diseased imagination. Europeans answered the question, “Who am I in this strange new place?” with sin and selfishness (p. 160). Do a little exercise in imagination now. How else could the Europeans have answered that question? How could the landing of Europeans in the New World have turned out differently?
8. Mayfield is trying to “pay attention to the anguish I feel instead of rushing to give into anger, despair, and cynicism” (p. 168). When you hear stories of hatred, what are your reactions? How can paying attention to anguish be more helpful than giving into anger, despair, and cynicism?
9. In what ways has the American system (legal, economic, political, social) worked for you? In what ways has it not? Do you view the system as just? Mayfield calls it “a demonic system that leads to death” (p. 173). Do you agree?
10. What were you taught about power? Was it something to grasp or something to lay down willingly (p. 177)? In what ways might you be called to lay down power?
11. Mayfield has caught glimpses of shalom—God’s kingdom—in the musical Hamilton, in Scripture passages about Jubilee and Sabbath laws, and in her own neighborhood school as she teaches ESL. What are the most powerful glimpses of shalom you’ve witnessed?



EPILOGUE

1. Which of the sections (affluence, autonomy, safety, and power) was most challenging for you to read? Why?
2. Mayfield retells the story about Jesus proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor to a synagogue and his listeners’ furious reactions to Jesus “leaving out the bits about judgment against perceived enemies and for saying the kingdom would come from those we were taught to hate and despise” (p. 186-87). Who can you relate to in this story—the hated and despised, the crowd of chosen people, both? What does this story mean for you?
3. How has reading Mayfield’s understanding of the good news of Jesus changed how you understand the gospel? How have you been challenged? How have you been inspired? Even if you have benefitted from the systems of the world (p. 188), how is Jesus’ message good news to you?
4. “Proximity only changes us if we enter into other peoples’ suffering,” Mayfield writes (p. 189). What might it look like for you to enter into the suffering of your neighbors who have been excluded from the American Dream?
5. After reading this book, what do you feel called to do next?