

American Identity: The Redemptive Self

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ing 10 years of research that my students, colleagues, and I had conducted on *generativity*—what Erik Erikson (1963) long ago described as the adult's concern for and commitment to promoting the well-being of future generations. Drawing on quantitative results and qualitative interviews, I argued that generative men and women tend to tell a certain kind of story about their lives, a story that emphasizes the themes of suffering, redemption, and personal destiny. Having a story like this one, I argued, helps a person to be generative by sustaining hope in the face of adversity and perseverance for the long run.

At the end of the talk, my first question/comment came from a Dutch woman in the front row: "Professor McAdams, this is very interesting, but these life stories you describe, they seem so, well, *American*. We Europeans admire this kind of story, but it is not ours." I countered with some sort of lame response. But later I came to believe that the woman in the front row was largely right. There are caring, productive, and generative people in all societies. But might it be the case that each society holds out its own distinctive forms for what living a generative life should mean? If yes, then what do the life stories of highly generative *American* adults say about American identity? My current answer is my book.

What does it mean to be an American?

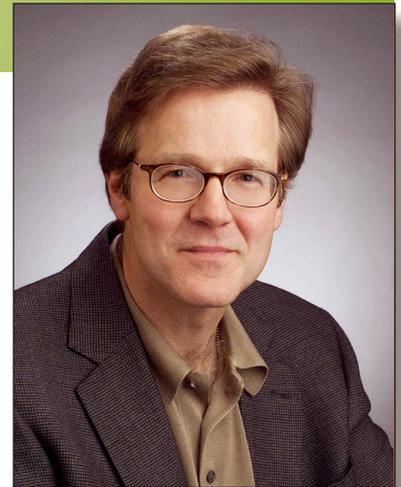
Social and behavioral scientists have long argued about the extent to which a particular type of American character or personality plays itself out on the world stage, expressed and sublimated in both the public and the private arenas of lived experience. Researchers, however, have never been very successful in identifying a set of discrete personality traits that distinguish clearly one national or cultural group

Had I not attended a conference in the Netherlands in the summer of 2000, I might never have written *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* (McAdams, 2006). At the conference, I presented a paper review-

from another. It is dubious to claim, therefore, that Americans are more aggressive, domineering, altruistic, friendly, boastful, honest, fun-loving, idealistic, cynical, or whatever, compared to citizens of other nations (McAdams & Pals, 2006; but for a contrary view, see McCrae et al., 2005). Psychologically speaking, American identity lies not in our personality traits, our behavior, our dispositions and complexes, or even our most deeply held political and religious values. It lies instead, if it lies anywhere, in our *stories*.

Here is a personal story—a biographical script of sorts—that many very productive and caring American adults see as their own: *In the beginning, I learn that I am blessed, even as others suffer. When I am still very young, I come to believe in a set of simple core values to guide me through a dangerous life terrain. As I move forward in life, many bad things come my way—sin, sickness, abuse, addiction, injustice, poverty, stagnation. But bad things often lead to good outcomes—my suffering is redeemed. Redemption comes to me in the form of atonement, recovery, emancipation, enlightenment, upward social mobility, and/or the actualization of my good inner self. As the plot unfolds, I continue to grow and progress. I bear fruit; I give back; I offer a unique contribution. I will make a happy ending, even in a threatening world.*

I call this story *the redemptive self*. The redemptive self is a particular kind of *life story* told, lived, and imagined by many highly productive and caring American adults, men and women who score high on quantitative measures of generativity. But even American adults who are not especially generative know this story, and like the woman in the front row, they admire it. The redemptive self provides Americans of many different persuasions with a common language or format for making sense of an individual life. Even when we resist seeing our lives as conforming to this pattern, we are deeply (often unconsciously) cognizant of the pattern, and we must ultimately come to terms with it.



Dan McAdams

As a cultural narrative, the redemptive self resonates with some of the most cherished texts and ideas in America's cultural heritage—from the spiritual autobiographies written by 17th-century Puritans to the 19th-century African-American slave narratives; from Benjamin Franklin's autobiography to the latest self-help manuals, business guides, Hollywood movies, *People* magazine, best-selling fiction, prime-time entertainment, and episodes of the Oprah Winfrey Show. As a psychological narrative, the redemptive self is a story that functions to support or reinforce some of the most well-meaning efforts of caring, productive, and principled American adults to make a positive difference in the world. At the same time, this self-defining story implicitly reconfigures and plays out contested cultural themes about what it means to be an American—like the idea that we are a “chosen people,” destined to live free and spread freedom, even if the world does not wish to go along. Mainly for better but sometimes for worse, many Americans cannot help but apprehend their lives as variations on an autobiographical script that is as American as apple pie, the Super Bowl, and manifest destiny.



Alexis de Tocqueville

I have studied life stories for 25 years, and for much of that time, I have focused attention on the life stories told by especially generative adults. According to Erikson (1963), the most obvious and natural expression of generativity is the care that parents provide for their children. But Erikson maintained that generativity can be expressed in many other ways, too, including teaching, mentoring, leadership, and various other life commitments that involve leaving a positive legacy of the self for the future. Generative adults seek to give something back to society. They pass on valued traditions, and they create new ones. They work to make the world a better place, not just for themselves but for future generations, as well. A considerable body of research shows that adults who score high on measures of generativity tend to express more warmth and discipline in their parenting practices, be more actively involved in their children's schooling, have closer family ties and broader networks of friendships, do more volunteer work, vote more often and engage in civic activities, and show higher levels of psychological health and well-being, compared to less generative adults

(e.g., de St. Aubin, McAdams, & Kim, 2004; McAdams, 2001; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1998; Peterson, 2006). As I argued in my talk in the Netherlands, highly generative American adults, furthermore, are statistically much more likely than their less generative counterparts to tell life stories that sound like the redemptive self.

How Does the Story Begin?

Visiting the United States in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that Americans believe themselves to be “the only religious, enlightened, and free people. They have an immensely high opinion of themselves and are not far from believing that they form a species apart from the rest of the human race.” Tocqueville realized that the Americans' sense of special destiny lay partly in their celebration of the individual self. “One's self I sing, a simple separate person,” proclaimed Walt Whitman. And, “Is not a man better than a town?” asked Ralph Waldo Emerson, in *Self-Reliance*. (The fact that a town is made up of individual men—and women—seems strangely absent from Emerson's thinking.) Not only are we the chosen people, Emerson suggested, but each individual man (or woman) is *chosen for a special destiny*. That individual destiny is inscribed within an inner self that is always true and good. “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string,” Emerson wrote. In Emerson's uniquely American brand

Who Tells This Story?

A life story is an internalized and evolving narrative of the self that provides a life with some degree of coherence and purpose. It is less an objective rendering of what “really” happened in life and more a *personal myth*, part fact and part fiction, selected and edited to function as a narrative of personal identity (McAdams, 2008; McLean, Papsupathi, & Pals, 2007; Singer, 2005). Beginning in the adolescent years, most people start to put their lives together into a story by reconstructing the past and imagining the future as an ongoing narrative that depicts who they were, are, and will be—and how the past, present, and future are meaningfully linked (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1985). As adults, we walk around with these stories inside us, frequently drawing upon them, or parts of them, to explain ourselves to others, to guide our behavior and shape our experience, and to inform the decisions we make about our lives. We continue to work on our stories, unconsciously editing and tweaking, sometimes radically revising, as we move through the adult life course. Our stories spell out our identities. But they also speak to and for *culture*. Life stories sometimes say as much about the culture wherein they are told as they do about the teller of the story.

of romantic individualism, the good and productive life is the heroic actualization of the inner self. To live freely and truthfully is to manifest one's inner destiny.

Flash forward 150 years or so. In life-narrative interviews, highly generative American adults tend to begin the stories of their own lives in the same way. Of course, Whitman and Emerson are not the protagonists in these psychological narratives, and rarely do the authors employ lofty religious or political rhetoric. But they speak a language of chosen-ness and manifest destiny, albeit in contemporary and personal ways. To a significantly greater extent than their less generative peers, highly generative American adults at midlife will often identify an incident from childhood as symbolic of their enhanced status, as if to suggest that they have known that they were special, that they were chosen, for a very long time. Perhaps mom liked me the best. Maybe it was the wonderful second-grade teacher I had, or a loving aunt, or my special talents in music, or the responsibilities I assumed when my father died, or the fact that we were the only African-American family on the street, which provided me with special challenges and opportunities.

In stories like these, the protagonist is chosen early on for a special destiny. At the same time, he or she shows an early awareness that the world is not fair and that many other people suffer greatly. One highly generative adult remembers how the children on her street used to tease a retarded boy. Another recalls how the church bus was re-routed so that it would not have to pick up black kids on Sunday morning. Yet another saw how his friends were mistreated or neglected by their parents. And yet another identifies the death of John F. Kennedy as the most memorable event of her childhood. My research shows that highly generative adults are *five times more likely* than less generative adults to import spontaneously into their life-narrative accounts a discrete childhood incident in which they felt empathy for the suffering of another or witnessed an injustice experienced by another person. It is as if these narrators want their listeners to know this about the beginnings of their stories: I was blessed, but others suffered; or put differently, I was chosen for a special destiny in a dangerous world.

My Good Inner Self and the Power of Moral Clarity

From self-help gurus to scientific researchers, American experts on psychological development have long worked within the same narrative tradition that has given us the redemptive self. From the inspirational tracts put out by pop psychologists to the latest scientific theorizing about mother-infant attachment, American experts maintain that the first goal of healthy psychological development is to establish a good and coherent sense of self in a threatening environment. This achievement typically depends on a trusting relationship with an "attachment figure," a "mirroring object," or some other caring person who protects the infant from danger and nurtures the realization of the infant's good inner potential. Theorists simply assume that

(1) infants need to establish distinctive selves, (2) those selves are always good and true, and (3) environments are filled with dangers that threaten to undermine the good inner selves with which we are all blessed. While these assumptions may be useful in promoting healthy development, they are not the objective givens or universal developmental rules that many experts claim. Instead, they are narrative conventions—culturally-conditioned ways of telling a good story about human development. American psychologists rarely think to tell other kinds of stories.

What other kinds of stories? Well, how about this: *Infants are conflicted at their very core, and as they grow up they develop greater and greater ambivalence about the world and their place in it.* That's vintage Freud, by the

way. Americans have always preferred Emerson to Freud, although they may not realize it. Throughout the 20th century, American psychoanalysts sanitized and simplified Freud in order to sell him to the optimistic American consumer. Freud's supremely tragic view of human life is difficult to square with the life experiences that most middle-class Americans know, or aspire to know. And it cannot be squared with America's cultural heritage. In his cultural history of psychotherapy, Cushman (1995) argues that Americans' prevailing understanding of their inner self—the "human interior"—mirrors their sense of geog-

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raphy. Like the heartland of North America, the inner self is large and good, and our manifest destiny is to “liberate” it—to free up and actualize its vast potential.

The good is inside us. But the outside world is bad, and in need of redemption. In the life stories of highly generative adults, the contrast between the protagonist’s early blessing and the misfortune of others in the outside environment sets up a moral imperative. If I am especially favored in a difficult world, then it becomes my calling to exert some positive impact on that world. I need to use my gifts in a positive way. I need to give something back. The sense of individual mission that runs through the life stories of highly generative American adults is often linked to life principles consolidated in the teen-aged years, be the formative influences the Baptist church, Ayn Rand, Maya Angelou, or *Tuesdays with Morrie*. As young people, protagonists dedicate themselves to simple moral principles like the Golden Rule. Often rooted in a religious tradition, these principles establish an ideological setting for the life story. As the plot unfolds over time, many things change, but the setting remains relatively stable.

The protagonists in these stories are not the tormented souls or ironic drifters celebrated by European existentialist writers and postmodern literary critics. They don’t wake up in the middle of the night wondering what the meaning of life is. They know what is right, more or less, and they strive to put their life principles into action. There is a decided lack of ambivalence about moral and ethical values in the life stories of highly generative American adults, be they born-again Christians or card-carrying members of the ACLU. Instead, we witness clear-eyed, no-nonsense protagonists who have too many things to do and too little time to waste on a searching re-examination of what is good and true, who is God, and what they believe in their hearts to be right. From Ben Franklin to Michael Jordan, prototypical American heroes and heroines are more pragmatic than reflective. They are too restless for prolonged philosophical debate. They brush aside nagging doubts, ignore complexities. They attach themselves to a few simple principles in life, and then they move forward with vigor and confidence.

How Does the Plot Develop? The Languages of Redemption

In a famous quote, F. Scott Fitzgerald once said that there are no second acts in American lives. But Fitzgerald was certainly wrong, for Americans are as adept as any people in the world at re-inventing themselves through stories of redemption. From rags-to-riches success stories to 12-step recovery programs, Americans enact second, third, and even more acts in their self-defining life dramas. The burgeoning popular literature on self-help offers a cornucopia of redemption tales, as do television talk shows and human-interest stories in the media. Politicians celebrate their own redemptive journeys: Ronald Reagan rose from a dysfunctional family; Bill Clinton (nicknamed “The Comeback Kid”) recovered from childhood poverty (as well as many self-inflicted wounds); George W. Bush turned his life around in his early 40s, after years of drifting and drinking;

John Edwards started out “the son of a millworker,” but he rose from there. Surveying American novels and short stories from recent years, the *New York Times* book reviewer, Michiko Kakutani (2001), wrote, “There is no public narrative more potent today—or throughout American history—than the one about redemption” (p. D1).

Highly generative American adults develop the plots of their redemptive tales in many different ways. Some employ a religious language in narrating their own pilgrimage from sin and shame to personal atonement. Others speak a language of liberation: In some sense, they were once enslaved or imprisoned, but now they have been set free. Still others talk of a move from ignorance to wisdom, illness to recovery, or hypocrisy and self-abnegation to the full expression of the good inner self. While the lan-

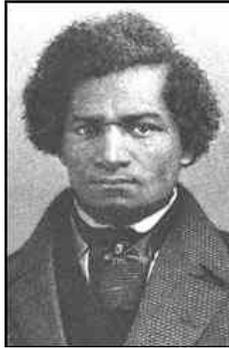
guages they use are contemporary, the plot’s redemptive features and its emphasis on the protagonist’s forward progress are staples of a distinctively American narrative heritage. In 1835, Tocqueville wrote that Americans seemed to be true believers in “the Idea of the Infinite Perfectibility of Man.” In 1857, Abraham Lincoln wrote, “I had thought the Declaration [of Independence] contemplated the progressive improvement of all men everywhere.”

We walk around with these stories inside us, frequently drawing upon them...to explain ourselves to others, to guide our behavior and shape our experience, and to inform the decisions we make about our lives.

McAdams: American Identity...

From Benjamin Franklin to Senator John Edwards, the rags-to-riches success story—sometimes called “the American Dream”—has enjoyed a privileged status in the anthology of American myths. As the Industrial Revolution transformed American society in the 19th and early 20th centuries, stories of success and upward mobility moved from the farmers and tradesmen of Franklin’s day to the hardscrabble work settings produced by capitalist industry. In this harsh environment of robber barons and union busting, many Americans still embraced stories of economic uplift and the triumph of the little man. Redemptive narratives chronicling the move from poverty to economic well-being were especially popular among the nation’s immigrants in the early years of the 20th century, as epitomized in the inspirational tales written by Horatio Alger. Today, stories like these continue to undergird the aspirations of immigrants and many others who hope to secure a piece of the American Dream.

Another set of influential narratives from 19th-century America document a more dramatic redemptive move, from slavery to freedom. As many as 60,000 black slaves may have escaped to freedom across the Ohio River and the Mason-Dixon line before the onset of the American Civil War. Under the sponsorship of Northern abolitionists, a number of escaped slaves wrote vivid, autobiographical accounts of their years in captivity, the most famous of which is the account written by Frederick Douglass. Magnifying many of the themes that appear in the redemptive self, these powerful stories typically feature a hero who, despite his enslavement, enjoys a favored status in childhood while being exposed from the beginning to the horrific suffering of others. (Many slaves identified with the Old Testament Hebrews as God’s chosen people in an unredeemed world.) The story depicts cruel masters, duplicitous overseers, brutal beatings, and slave auctions that ripped black families apart. But the protagonist perseveres and overcomes, develops and matures, and enjoys the benefits of life-saving turning points, like learning to read. The story chronicles how the prospect of freedom evolves gradually in the protagonist’s mind, beginning as a fantasy and ending in a detailed plan that typically involves deceptive schemes and life-and-death risks. The narrative ends with the protagonist’s arrival in the free states, his or her warm reception from Quakers or other religious and political figures, and the assumption of a new last name to signify a new social identity as a free woman or man.



Frederick Douglass

The slave narratives served a prime moral and political purpose—to educate whites about the evils of America’s peculiar institution and to rally the readership around the cause of abolitionism. But these texts also served to initiate what the Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and others have identified as a distinctive African-American literary tradition. The slave narratives expressed images and themes that have been incorporated and reworked ever since in black autobiography, fiction, music, drama, and the cinema. The redemptive move from bondage to freedom is a dominant motif in such celebrated black autobiographies as Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. While the protagonists of these stories are not literally enslaved, their growth and development over time involve many of the same social and psychological dynamics that Frederick Douglass himself knew, and

worked through. Indeed, the redemptive move described by especially generative African-American adults today is often visualized as *vertical*, as Booker T. Washington suggested in his autobiography, *Up From Slavery*—up from the plantation to the town, up from the South to the North, out from under oppression’s thumb and struggling to move up in a society that still wants to hold you down. The prospect of moving up and out, breaking out of the cage to fly free still resonates for many Americans, both black and white, affirming what Barack Obama has famously called “the audacity of hope.”

Perhaps the most influential spokesperson for redemption in America for the past decade or so has been Oprah Winfrey. Through her television show, magazine, and philanthropy, Oprah urges people to take charge of their lives, to overcome their obstacles, to pursue their dreams, and to think about ways to give back to society. Encouraging adults to tell and revise their own stories, Oprah tells and sells her own. Born dirt poor in Kosciusko, Mississippi, the African-American heroine survives sexual abuse as a child to become first a radio reporter, then a news anchor, a talk-show host, movie-maker, publishing czar, and finally an international celebrity and philanthropist. Like many highly generative American adults, Oprah believes she has been chosen to make a difference in the world. She urges people to resist societal norms and obey their good, inner selves. Her redemptive life journey uses the languages of recovery and upward mobility. In a recent interview, Oprah says: “I grew up a little Negro child who felt so unloved and so isolated—the emotion I felt most as a child was loneli-

ness—and now the exact opposite has occurred for me in adulthood.” As evidenced in her own recovery from sexual abuse, Oprah argues that people can survive traumatic experiences and come out even stronger. “Your holiest moments, most sacred moments, are often the ones that are the most painful.”

What’s Wrong with this Story?

The redemptive self is the mom-and-apple-pie of American narrative identity. Believing you are one of the chosen people in an unredeemed world, espousing clear moral values that guide your action from beginning to end, affirming the power of human redemption in the face of inevitable suffering, seeing your life as a progressive saga of growth and self-fulfillment—these are substantial strengths in modern life. As parents, teachers, mentors, leaders, activists, worshippers, and productive American citizens, highly generative American adults find in their own redemptive life narratives psychological resources to sustain their commitments to family and society.

Yet, no story is perfect. For all its psychological and moral appeal, the redemptive self may reflect important shortcomings and blind spots in Americans’ understandings of themselves and the world. Is it not arrogant, for example, to imagine one’s life as the full manifestation of an inner destiny? And is it not presumptuous to expect deliverance from all suffering? Might it be an affront to those who have suffered the greatest calamities and heartaches to expect, even to suggest, that things will work out nice and happy in the end? While redemptive life narratives affirm hope and human progress, we must also face up to the potential dark side of American redemption.

To the ambivalent among us, to the hand-wringers and nay-sayers, to the skeptics and political realists, to the folks who wake up in the middle of the night and wonder if they are indeed doing the right thing, the simple sincerity and quiet confidence of some highly generative American adults can be damn annoying. True belief can look like arrogance (or ignorance). Sustained commitment can seem rigid, narrow, or even blind. And how do we feel when our truths are different from theirs? When the commitments we make conflict with the commitments they make? There

is no research evidence to suggest that highly generative American adults are any more narrow-minded or dogmatic than individuals low in generativity. But the *life stories* that highly generative adults live by portray a main character who is chosen for goodness, who believes steadfastly in a deep inner truth, and who moves forward in life with the confidence that comes from feeling distinguished and exceptional. The *story* may have a kind of arrogance about it, even if the *person* living it seems humble and nice.

From the shameless expansionism of the 19th century to the current war in Iraq, cultural observers have taken Americans to task for their arrogant exceptionalism and their deeply held belief that they are the chosen people. American exceptionalism sometimes takes the form of a blithe and naïve isolationism, as Americans go their merry way without paying much attention to what the rest of the world is doing. But American exceptionalism can also take the form of psychological, cultural, and political imperialism, especially when it is buttressed by power: I am blessed with the truth; I will share the truth with you; I will liberate you to see the truth the way I see it; you will follow my path, which is the right path; you will follow my path even if you do not want to.

Moreover, there may be a kind of psychological tyranny in the never-ending expectation in American life that bad things will and should be redeemed. When people tell us their problems, we anticipate that they will also tell us how they have solved them. And when they do not tell us that, we may want to help them find the happy ending we all want. We value and expect improvement, growth, recovery, upward mobility, and the like. We listen intently for the redemptive message in a life narration. When we do not hear it, we are troubled or confused. How can that be? Surely, *something good* must have come out of that!

Well, maybe not.

Many psychotherapists help their patients develop more redemptive understandings of their lives, in order to promote psychological well-being and meaningful participation in society. For the most part, this is good. But a few mental health experts have recently argued that the emphasis on redemption may be too strong, especially among American counselors and therapists. Some Euro-

From self-help gurus to scientific researchers, American experts on psychological development have long worked within the same narrative tradition that has given us the redemptive self.

pean and Israeli psychologists write that many people's lives would be enriched if they were more aware of the narrative power of *tragedy* (e.g., Alon & Omer, 2004). In classic Greek or Shakespearean tragedy, the hero suffers a fate that he or she cannot avoid and for which he or she is not fully responsible. Oedipus cannot avoid the fate of killing his father and sleeping with his mother, no matter how hard he tries. The tragic hero learns that suffering is an essential part of life, even when the suffering has no ultimate meaning, benefit, or human cause. Suffering is to be endured, but not necessarily redeemed. Human beings are moral agents, to be sure, but not every action or event makes sense in a moral framework. Sometimes we are just lucky, or unlucky. Fate, happenstance, blind chance, serendipity—tragedy teaches us that lives sometimes turn on these capricious factors.

Tragedy also teaches us other lessons that serve as a psychologically useful counterpoint to the redemptive self. For example, tragedy calls into question the belief that any particular individual is blessed with an innocent and good inner self that is destined to achieve good things. Tragedy gives fuller expression to the ambivalence and multiplicity of human lives than do many other narrative forms. It looks with skepticism upon the kind of ideological certitude celebrated in the redemptive self. Surely, it is good for people to have strong moral principles. But many would say that the principles need to be flexible, and need to change as the world changes. The tragic hero anguishes over the moral complexities in the world. He or she does not settle for simple truths and pat answers.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, tragedy opens people up to each other and sometimes brings them closer together. People often identify moments of greatest intimacy in their lives as those times when they shared with others deep sadness and pain. From soldiers to survivors to sorority sisters, people often report that shared suffering bonds them to others in a powerful and enduring way. It may also be true that others are easier to like and to know when they admit to their own vulnerabilities and flaws. Tragedy suggests that we are all flawed, and it rejects the notion that selves can ever be perfected. The redemptive self can sometimes seem impenetrable and aloof in its deep commitment to improving the self and

the world. The person whose story celebrates his or her unique giftedness, moral clarity, and redemptive quest to make over the world may evoke our admiration, but he or she may also scare us off a little bit, or put us off, or make us feel inferior.

Conclusion

We are the stories we live by. In America, one of the most powerful stories for the construction of adult identity is the redemptive self. It is a very good story—a story that celebrates the power of human agency to make the world a better place, while sustaining commitment to family and community. Affirmed most clearly in the internalized life stories of especially generative American adults, the redemptive self plays out images, themes, characters, plots, and scenes that resonate with some of the most cherished and contested narratives in the American heritage, ranging from the Puritans to Oprah.

The shortcomings and the limitations of the redemptive self reflect cultural concerns that have been at the heart of American national identity for the past two centuries. Tocqueville warned of the potential dangers of unbridled American individualism and self-righteousness. Violence in the name of redemption is as old as the republic itself, as witnessed in expansionism and imperialism in the name of manifest destiny and other purportedly lofty principles. Americans are known for their pragmatic, can-do optimistic spirit. But this attitude about life finds it difficult to allow for the possibility that life's deepest meanings may be found in tragedy as well as redemption.

The redemptive self reflects cultural and psychological tensions with which Americans have struggled for a very long time. And we continue to struggle with them. But we should not forget that there is no good story that is free of struggle and tension. There is no perfect life narrative, just as there is no perfect life, or perfect society. Every narrative identity is like a double-edged sword, cutting both ways. The redemptive self affirms a generative commitment to society, but it opens itself up to the dangers of psychological and cultural exceptionalism. The redemptive self celebrates the power of human resilience and growth, but it may also fall prey to arrogance and self-righteousness. The redemptive self sustains hope, but blind hope is naïve. Knowing who we are as Americans should involve know-

While redemptive life narratives affirm hope and human progress, we must also face up to the potential dark side of American redemption.

ing the strengths and the limitations of the stories we live by, and knowing that others may live by stories very different from our own.

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