“What Happened to the American Dream?”

Date: Tuesday, March 4, 5:30 p.m.
Location: Sedona Public Library
Facilitated by: Dr. Jona Vance, NAU Department of Philosophy
Attendance: 19

What does the American Dream mean to you?

- The American Dream is not univocal. It will vary for each individual and it from generation to generation.
- Some conceptions of the American Dream include: upward mobility, financial security, and a better life; a living wage and the ability to own a home; the opportunity to get the best education you want; and for the next generation to have a better life than the previous.
- Since the American Dream can be so variable, one way to measure it might be setting goals for yourself and tracking your own personal achievement.
- At one point the U.S. was considered a place where everyone was respected and valued. Thinking this way might align the American Dream with goals that extend beyond the individual and involve a sense of community.

Criticisms of the Dream

- The American Dream is retro. It has a 50s connotation, and may be too parochial in today’s global society.
- The very conception of a dream might imply that which is not real or attainable.

Is the American Dream more difficult to achieve now? If so, for who?

- Good jobs seem more difficult to get. Even people who are well educated do not have the same level of financial security as the generation before. While the American Dream may involve more than financial security, for most, some degree of financial security is a baseline before most other goals are pursued or attained.
Is the American Dream more difficult to achieve now? If so, for who? (Cont.)

- At the discussion, participants in the 20-40 year old range expressed a desire financial security, but emphasized the importance of being happy and pursuing a meaningful vocation.

- The dream may change as life goes on. As one grows older the dream may become about facilitating the dreams of those who are younger.

- As we consider this question we should keep in mind the large number of Americans that are in prison, and how alcohol and other drug problems make success according to almost any standard elusive.

- This led to the shared view that we need compassion as a national ethic. Compassion can be justified both spiritually and rationally. In our country we tend to have least compassion for the least well off. We can observe that right here.

- While Sedona is often thought of as a community of rich people without problems that perception is inaccurate. We have homeless people, but try to send them to other communities rather than taking care of them ourselves. People are struggling financially and in other ways, though that suffering is seldom acknowledged.

Should the American Dream define success?

- We were quick to realize that this depends on how we define the dream and how we define success.

- There was consensus that the American Dream is going global and should be global. It does not involve only what we can achieve for ourselves, but the conditions of life for people everywhere in the world.

Supported by Northern Arizona University College of Arts and Letters, Compassion Project, McKenzie Endowment for Democracy and the Richard Wood Fund.