

they can change, but rather as something to which they must submit, or at least something with which they must seek to live in harmony.

## GOODNESS OF HUMANITY

The future cannot be better if people in general are not fundamentally good and improvable. Americans assume that human nature is basically good, not basically evil. International visitors will see them doing many things that are based on this assumption. Some examples will help.

*Getting More Education or Training.* Formal education is not just for young people. It's for everyone. Many postsecondary students are adults who seek to "improve themselves" or to change careers by learning more or earning a degree. Newspaper articles at graduation time often feature grandmothers or grandfathers who have returned to school late in life and earned a college diploma. Educational institutions offer online courses, night and weekend classes, and correspondence courses so that people who have full-time jobs or who live far from a college or university have the opportunity to get more education.

"Continuing" educational opportunities in the form of workshops, seminars, or training programs are widely available. Through them people can learn about a huge array of topics, from being a better parent to investing money wisely to behaving more assertively. Professional development in many lines of work, such as teaching, nursing, and law, comes in the form of workshops or seminars.

*Rehabilitation.* Except in extreme cases where it would clearly be futile, efforts are made to rehabilitate people who have lost some physical capacity as a result of injury or illness. A person who learns to walk again after a debilitating accident is widely admired. Bicycle racer Lance Armstrong was acclaimed for continuing his career after overcoming testicular cancer.

Rehabilitation is not just for the physically infirm but for those who have failed socially as well. Jails, prisons, and detention centers are intended at least as much to train inmates to be socially useful as they are to punish

them. A widespread (but not universally held) assumption is that people who violate the law do so more because of adverse environmental conditions such as poverty, domestic violence, or the media than because they themselves are irredeemably evil individuals.

*Belief in Democratic Government.* We have already discussed some of the assumptions that underlie the American belief that a democratic form of government is best—assumptions about individualism, freedom, and equality. Another assumption is that people can make life better for themselves and others through the actions of governments they choose.

*Voluntarism.* It is not just through the actions of governments or other formal bodies that life can be improved but through the actions of citizen volunteers as well. Many international visitors are awed by the array of activities Americans support on a voluntary basis: parent-teacher organizations in elementary and secondary schools, community “service clubs” that raise money for worthy causes, organizations of families that play host to foreign students, “clean-up, paint-up, fix-up” campaigns to beautify communities, organizations working to preserve wilderness areas, and on and on.

I myself volunteer with the National Park Service. In Rocky Mountain National Park, which is near my summer home, I have painted picnic tables, repaired fences, cleared fallen trees from roadsides, answered visitors’ questions about hiking trails, and helped collect water samples from creeks for scientists to study. My wife volunteers in the local public library, where she checks in and reshelves books, searches for lost or misshelved items, and generally puts things back in their proper places. Sociologist Claude Fischer goes so far as to assert that such voluntarism is “a central feature of American culture and character” (2010, 10).

International visitors who plan to be in the United States for an extended period will find that volunteering with a service organization will afford them a more sophisticated understanding of at least a subset of Americans, as well as opportunities to establish closer relationships with some natives.

*Educational Campaigns.* When Americans perceive a social problem, they are likely (often on a voluntary basis) to establish an “educational campaign”

to “make the public aware” of the dangers of something and to induce people to take preventive or corrective action. Thus there are campaigns concerning tobacco, addictive drugs, alcohol, domestic abuse, handguns, and many specific diseases. Often these groups are started by someone who has either suffered personally from the problem or lost a loved one to it.

*Self-help.* Americans assume themselves to be improvable. We have already mentioned their participation in various educational and training programs. Mention has also been made of the array of “self-help” and “how-to” books Americans buy as well as of the number of group activities they join in order to make themselves “better.” Through things they read or groups they join, Americans can stop smoking, stop using alcohol, lose weight, improve their physical condition or memory or reading speed, manage their time and money more effectively, become better at their jobs, and seek to improve themselves in countless other ways.

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way,” U.S. Americans say. People who want to make things better can do so if only they have a strong enough motivation.

“Just do it!”—the Nike slogan—has an all-American sound.

## TIME

For Americans, time is a resource that, like water or coal, can be used well or poorly. “Time is money,” they say. “You only get so much time in this life; you’d best use it wisely.” As Americans are trained to see things, the future will not be better than the past or the present unless people use their time for constructive, future-oriented activities. Thus, Americans admire a “well-organized” person, one who has a list of things to do—either on a piece of paper or in a personal digital assistant—and a schedule for doing them. The ideal person is punctual (that is, arrives at the scheduled time for a meeting or event) and is considerate of other people’s time (that is, does not “waste people’s time” with conversation or other activity that has no visible, beneficial outcome).

Early in his long and productive career, American anthropologist Edward T. Hall lived and worked on reservations belonging to two Native