**LESSON TWO : Traditional American Values and Beliefs**

1. **The Context of Traditional American Values**

From the beginning of the history of the United States there has been diversity\_ Native Americans throughout the North American continent, Spanish settlers in the Southwest and in Florida, French missionaries and fur traders along the Mississippi River, black slaves brought from African countries, Dutch settlers in New York, Germans in Pennsylvania, and of course the British colonists. These early immigrants formed a diverse plural nation over time and created the American character. The questions then are: How could such diverse groups succeed to set the foundations of a new nation? How could a nation of such enormous diversity produce a recognizable national identity? How could they succeed to create a unique set of values that define their American character?

The answers of all of the questions are centred around the undesirable shared backgrounds they used to live in in their countries of origin, the reasons why these groups migrated to the new world, the opportunities they believed they could find there. In other words, the shared willing they came with and the image of the nation they hoped to belong to.

The first European settlers escaped the controls used to be put on their lives by kings and governments, priests and churches, noblemen and aristocrats. They sought freedom in a land where no system had been developed yet. The US for them and many who have come after them has been “the land of opportunity”, where their dreams could be a reality. The opportunities they believed they would find in America in addition to the experiences that most people actually had when they arrived gave rise to a unique set of values. Among these values are reasons why immigrants have been drawn to America\_ the chance for individual freedom, equality of opportunity, and material\_ wealth and their responsibilities to achieve these benefits\_ self-reliance, competition, and hard work. The American value system is then based on pairs of rights and responsibilities.

1. **Traditional American Values**
2. **Individual Freedom and Self-Reliance**

The earliest settlers came to the North American continent to establish colonies that were free from the controls that existed in European societies. They succeeded to a great extent to achieve freedom. In 1776, the British colonists declared their independence from England and established the new nation. They declared that the power to govern would lie in the hands of the people. When they wrote the Constitution for their new nation in 1787, they separated church and state to limit the power of the church and expressly forbade titles of nobility to ensure that an aristocratic society would not develop.

Accordingly, a climate of freedom with emphasis on the individual has been created and supported by means of the new Constitution. Since then, the concept of individual freedom has become associated with the US receiving so much respect and popularity there till the present day. In the US, individuals have looked for and succeeded to have the right to control their own destiny without outside interference from the government, a ruling noble class, the church, or any organized authority. This basic value\_ individual freedom or individualism\_ has continued to attract immigrants to this country.

However, this benefit of freedom is threatened with dependence on others. For individuals in the US to be free, they should be self-reliant and take responsibility for themselves. Traditionally, this has meant achieving both financial and emotional independence from their parents as early as possible. Self-reliance means that Americans believe they should take care of themselves, solve their own problems, and “stand on their own feet.”

Americans till the present day believe in the value of self-reliance as essential to save their freedom. For them, if they rely too much on the support of others, they may lose some of their freedom. Being self-reliant, or a least showing to be so is necessary to be in the mainstream of American life\_ to have power and/or respect\_ individuals must be seen as self-reliant. Although receiving financial support from family, charity, or the government is possible, it is usually expected to be for a short time, and it is generally not admired.

1. **Equality of Opportunity and Competition**

Immigrants have been also drawn to the US with the expectation that everyone would has a chance to succeed there. Because individuals in the new nation are free from excessive political, religious, and social controls, they have a better chance for personal success. Immigrants have come with similar backgrounds and all have been looking for proving themselves far from their former countries where they used to live in lower social classes with no chance for upward mobility. And with the absence of a hereditary aristocracy in the US, these people would have equal opportunities to succeed.

Millions of these early immigrants succeeded in the new country and their hopes and dreams have become a reality. The lower social class into which many were born did not prevent them to try and succeed to proceed and develop. Since then, Americans came to believe in equality of opportunity as a basic American value and as an ethical rule. This value is paired with another in order to be fulfilled with success, that is, competition. Life to Americans is seen much as a race for success in which all individuals have equal chances to enter the race. All have to compete with one another to win the race. It is only someone’s skills and power in competition that matters; no one may win or loose because of his social class, wealth, race, religion…. This competition is then a “fair-play”.

Competition is a vital aspect of American life that starts from childhood to retirement from work. Americans live with the pressures of competition and they learn to compete successfully to grow up. Strong programs of competitive sports provided by the public schools and community groups encourage competition so that Americans have become energetic and pressed all of the time. They don’t have time to be free from the pressures of competition only when they retire. But then they may feel useless and unwanted in a society that gives so much prestige to those who compete well. Generally, successful competition is necessary for individuals to fit into the mainstream of American life and to gain honor and respect.

1. **Material Wealth and Hard Work**

The third reason why immigrants have come to the US is to have a better life\_ that is, to raise their standard of living. Millions of immigrants migrated to the new nations to seek their fortunes because of its incredibly abundant natural resources. While some suffered terribly there, the majority of these immigrants succeeded to improve their former standard of living. They believed in “going from rags to riches” that became a slogan for the “American dream.” The vast riches of the North American continent enabled many of the immigrants to achieve the dream and gain material success, and many became very attached to material things. Material wealth became a value to the American people so that Americans have been described as being materialistic, that is they value material possessions more than anything else. However, for them this description is an insult and unfair to them.

Material wealth is of great importance to Americans because it has traditionally been a widely accepted measure of social status in the US. The quality and quantity of an individual’s material possessions became an accepted measure of success and social status since as stated above Americans rejected the European system of hereditary aristocracy system. In addition, the Puritan work ethic associated material success with godliness.

For material wealth early settlers have worked hard to convert the North American undeveloped natural resources into material possessions. Hard work have paired with gaining material wealth and have become a traditional American value that has been both necessary and rewarding for most Americans throughout their history. To Americans, the quantity of material possessions reflects ones abilities and hard work. However, the value of hard work and the slogan of “go from rags to riches” have lost their nature as tangible realities since the shift from industry based economy to service- or information based one. There has been a decline in high-paying jobs. It is now much more difficult for the average worker to go from rags to riches in the US. Another reason is also the economic fluctuations that the US economy witnesses in the course of global economy competition that cause many workers to loose their jobs. The number of poor workers and those who seek outside assistance have increased accordingly.

1. **American Values and the State of the American Dream**

The American dream has traditionally meant that by working hard, parents can enable their children to have a better life when they grow up. Generations could be a little more prosperous than their preceding. The rights and responsibilities that form the six American values creates the fabric that defines the American Dream, that is if people take responsibility for their lives and work hard, they will have the individual freedom to pursue their personal goals and a good opportunity to compete for success.

Today, centuries after the nation early years, the situations have been changed. The economy of the US has been in fluctuation. This has affected almost every American value. As a result of state of economy, many workers are losing their jobs, low-paying jobs spread, it becomes hard for many people to reach a decent standard of living, many are seeking outside assistance…. This new situation arises the questions if the American Dream is really dead or at least in danger, and if the traditional American values have become ideals rather than realities as in the past. In fact, Americans still strongly believe in their values despite the fact that it is not always necessary for these values to be achieved. They still hope that the American Dream will exist again, if not for them, then for their children.

Although American ideals are only partly carried out in real life, they have not lost their importance to Americans. They still define the American identity and form the basic structure of the American culture.