

It is no secret to my family that I have a deep affection for American cars. The contemporary aluminum, fiberglass, or plastic American-made cars are not the vehicles that catch my eye, but I gape open-mouthed at those beautiful classics of steel and chrome of yesteryear. Nothing can turn my frown upside down as quick as seeing a muscle car or a vintage pickup truck driving down the road. The memory card in my cell phone is filled with pictures of gleaming classic trucks and the curvaceous or angled vehicles that have been known to stop my heart mid-beat from time to time.

My appreciation for classic American-made vehicles runs so deep within me as to affect my reading choices. I have read a great memoir by Michael Perry titled *Truck, a love story*, about an International Pickup, simply because of the word “Truck”. I read John Grisham’s short story collection, *Ford County*, just because the word “Ford” was in the title. Even though I’m not an avid reader of genre fiction, I really enjoyed Grisham’s book, and I think that the title itself had a lot to do with it. I’ve also felt that the author who goes by the ingenious name of G.M. Ford would definitely be worth my time and I have added reading at least one of his mystery novels to my “must do” list.

Perhaps it’s natural for a person to become nostalgic as she ages, but the reality is that we have to go pretty far back in time or search the internet fairly aggressively to find anything that is being made in America these days. Nostalgia encompasses more than material things. Anymore, I am feeling nostalgic for the heyday of American production, for that was a time when people in the U.S. had jobs. At the time of this writing, the national unemployment rate is 9.6%, where my home state of Oregon holds steady at 10.5%. It appears that America is no longer working, and we have only ourselves to blame. With only 14.16 million manufacturing jobs in the U.S. compared to China’s 112.63 million, it’s easy to see why we no longer have power tools that can take a beating, small appliance that last 20 years, or jobs by which to earn a living. We wanted cheap and we got it in full measure. If we would have paid more attention in school to our Economics teachers, perhaps we would have better remembered that we get what we pay for.

In their book, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living In An Age Of Entitlement*, Doctors Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell address the premise that our contemporary American culture is far too self-obsessed. From the authors' website, two of the signs of a culture of narcissistic attitude are materialism and entitlement. When I think of a narcissist, I think of a person who is vainglorious, someone who is so full of themselves that they truly believe that the whole world revolves around them and that there is no reason for them not to do whatever they want. Examples of those with such grandiose personalities are Adolph Hitler, Nero, Saddam Hussein, and Osama Bin Laden, just to name a few.

Based simply on materialism alone, it would not be too difficult to label American culture as narcissistic. Materialism has become an easy enough objective in America, in part because products are so cheap and easily accessible. Things have become so easy to acquire that we seem to have no appreciation for them as we overfill our landfills with outdated models and rent storage sheds to store our hoarded treasures. We take all of our modern conveniences for granted, such as our appliances, laptops, cell phones and any number of the nifty gadgets within easy reach of our pocketbooks. We are constantly upgrading, improving, and replacing our stuff.

Within the mindset of a narcissistic American society lays the assumption, no- the *belief*, that all in the world is done to make our lives in America more enjoyable. This attitude is a far cry from that of the original settlers and statesmen of this country who believed that all men are created equal and that each is responsible for his own pursuit of happiness. To a more severe extent, the slave owners tarnishing our history are an example of an American mindset much like the presumed narcissistic epidemic that we are experiencing today. The slave owners felt, no – they *believed*, that black people were inferior to them in every way and therefore the blacks were by nature destined to live a life in chains. Slavery in America may have ended in 1865 with the 13th Amendment to the constitution, but the superior attitude towards blacks that the whites held permeated the American mindset well into the

twentieth century in the form of lynchings, racial slurs, pay differences, hiring practices, and segregation.

During the time of slavery, the people of the North generally made their living in industry while the people of the south erected massive plantations that were made possible only by the enslavement of blacks. The slaves were forced to work the fields from sunup to sundown, with nary a thing to show for their labors but the fact that they were alive and still able to get up yet again the next day to do it all over again.

The slaves held by Americans had no human rights. The slave owners did not recognize any formal marriages between slaves who were bound into heavy, skin-cutting chains for the slightest offense. They were whipped for sport or as punishment within an inch of their lives, sometimes unto death, and female slaves were more likely than not destined to be raped by their white masters at whim. The working hours of slaves were from pre-dawn to nightfall on the plantations and even longer days were forced on those who worked indoors and those who undertook the evening chores of feeding the mules, slopping the hogs and cutting firewood.

Though greed did indeed play a major role in the myriad offenses against the slaves, fueling that greed was something more vile, something that causes an individual to disregard the humanity of other persons. Selfishness alone cannot account for the brutality and total disregard for human life that these perpetrators of domination held over an entire race of people. Selfishness to the point of narcissism may be the only explanation.

The founders of our country set the traditional American mindset that is still evident all across the United States today, if one takes the time to look for it. An attitude of self-reliance, determination, and working hard to accomplish one's goals is a birthright exemplified by our forefathers that is undertaken by countless people who are rugged individualists. I believe that there must be many such individuals based on the fact that I know at least ten myself, and I don't know all that many people by any means. By history's standards, America is a relatively young country. Spanning roughly

3,537,438.44 square miles including Alaska and Hawaii and home to more than 310,690,287 people, the lure of unmitigated choice has seen America grow in leaps and bounds since it's inception. With all those "Me's", America is choc-full of "We" to be sure.

A culture of narcissism bypasses the idea of working towards a worthwhile goal and the individuals involved simply expect to be rewarded for existing. Foregoing the birthright of having the freedom to work towards whatever goals we would like to accomplish, we've instead adopted a *belief* of entitlement. A belief that because we are Americans, we are entitled to reap benefits that we did not earn. We've seen it happening for years. We have seen people who beg government aid when they are perfectly capable of working, people who file insurance claims without true cause, and those who win outlandishly outrageous lawsuits. People believing that they are entitled are not new to America or humanity, but an entire culture of narcissists is a terrifying notion. Slavery, the Jim Jones tragedy in Guyana, and the SS of Hitler's reign are what come to mind when imagining such a society.

A culture of narcissists will most likely believe that paying a small pittance to persons who serve them is a feasible way in which they will receive the things to which they are entitled. We believe that we deserve nice cars, masses of gadgets, and big houses to store it all in. As North and South no longer divide America, it is our whole country that is involved in a slave ownership of sorts. After all, in an entitled society, if we can own slaves and keep our hands clean while doing so, we will do it. Such entitlement has led us to enslave just over 1.3 billion people, the people of China. It is easy for us to buy things knowing that they are made in China, because China is a communist country that does not broadcast any of its dealings anywhere to the rest of the world. China can be as secret and selective as it wants to be, and we don't mind. It makes it easier for us to pretend that the Chinese are our servants who are grateful to have work.

The campaign to save American jobs by "buying American" fell on deaf ears in the 1980's when it first became apparent that our manufacturing jobs were being shipped overseas. Although American companies have shifted their plants to countries other than China, such as Mexico and

Canada, as a means of increasing their profits, it is China that proliferates the pages of human rights violations. Amnesty International consistently documents widespread human rights violations throughout China, especially in the industrial areas.

The working conditions of the Chinese factory worker are not conditions that we would stand for in America. The average wage for a factory employee in China is roughly between .57 and .64 an hour. In the shadow factories the workers work from 12 to 17 hours a day, seven days a week. There are well over 24,000 deaths a year caused by silicosis, a lung disease caused by the inhalation of harmful dust created during the manufacturing of gems for jewelry. Proper ventilation, safety equipment and distance of proximity can prevent this disease. Perhaps there's a way to pay for the health costs for these people who produce all the things that we believe we deserve. Goodness knows we expect health insurance for ourselves from our own employers. It only seems right that the workers who make the things we buy receive health care from their employers. All we manage to give them for their efforts is the pollution that is causing their deaths.

The front factories, the factories seen by outsiders and toured by buyers and government officials, tend to offer the workers one day off a week and eight-hour workdays. I daresay that the conditions in either factory are such that no American would stand to work in one. The living quarters of the workers from either factory sleep up to 12 people in a small room, have a shared kitchen, and there is usually one bathroom to be shared between the entire floor. All of it is said to be filthy and disease-ridden. Since the workers usually migrate from villages in the country, they must live in these factory dormitories and pay rent to the owners in order to work at the factories.

Some may argue that it is a great opportunity for the Chinese people to be able to earn money so that they can send it home to their families and save up to own a home. I think it wonderful that the Chinese citizens are acquiring wealth and that the poor are moving upward to a more sustainable lifestyle. I am glad that the Chinese have an opportunity to earn money, I really am, but I will never believe that America is so altruistic as to sacrifice our own jobs, our livelihoods, and the homes of our

of own families for the sakes of individuals in a foreign country. The truth is, the person who is glad that the Chinese people are earning money at the expense of the American worker simply have not thought things through.

While we in America insist on environmentally ethical manufacturing and production practices, for what purpose is it if the same companies simply move their businesses across the Atlantic ocean where production is powered by coal, one of the most toxic power-generating pollutants in the world? At that point, what we've created is a worse environmental impact than had we maintained our production plants in the U.S. According to the World Bank, 16 of the world's 20 most polluted cities are in China, a country that suffers approximately 750,000 premature deaths a year attributed to the pollution. It is interesting that we spend billions of dollars a year on products that are produced using methods that not only destroy our environment, but also our bodies and the lives of those who make nearly everything that we buy. In fact, in light of these sobering figures, I feel rather two-faced about any environmental stand I've ever taken.

The question now being, are we bigots or narcissists, or have we simply been caught napping, so to speak? We have been proliferating the groundswell of human rights abuse in China for over three decades now. Is it because we are flat out lying when we attest to the equality of humankind, or is it because we feel that we are better than everybody else and therefore are entitled to take advantage of the politically underprivileged? The time to grow up is now, for narcissism is a childish state of mind and causes much unneeded suffering. We need to remove our hands from the whips stinging the backs of the Chinese laborers. Check the label, and if it says "made in China," leave it on the shelf. It is with a sad twist of irony that America was built on the backs of slaves, and that now the American industry, and America in turn, is being destroyed by the quasi-slaves of our own creation. Our arrogance, narcissism, and ignorance can be credited for both counts. Nostalgia for Americana never made more sense than it does today; it reminds us of that brief period in American history when we were more humane.