What’s Happening to America?
John Steinbeck

It is customary (indeed, at graduations it is a requirement) for speakers to refer to America as a “precious inheritance” – our heritage, a gift proffered like a sandwich wrapped in plastic on a plastic tray. Our ancestors, so it is implied, gathered to the invitation of a golden land and accepted the sacrament of milk and honey.

This is not so. In the beginning we crept, scuttled, escaped, were driven out of the safe and settled corners of the earth to the fringes of a strange and hostile wilderness, a nameless and hostile continent. Far from welcoming us, it resisted us. This land was no gift. The firstlings worked for it, fought for it, dies for it. They stole and cheated and double-crossed for it.

But we built America, and the process made us Americans – a new breed, rooted in all races, stained and tinted with all colors, a seeming ethnic anarchy. Then in a little, little time, we became more alike than different – a new society; not great, but fitted by our very faults for greatness: E Pluribus Unum.

The whole thing is crazy. Every single man in our emerging country was out for himself. When communities arose, each one defended itself against other communities. All that was required to release the mechanism of oppression was that the newcomers be poor, weak in numbers and unprotected – although it helped if their skin, hair, eyes, were different, and if they spoke some language other than English, or worshipped in some church other than Protestant. The Puritans took out after and other faith; the Germans clotted for self-defense until the Irish took the resented place; the Irish became “Americans” against the Poles, the Slavs against the Italians.

5- It occurs to me that this very cruelty toward newcomers might go far toward explaining the speed with which the ethnic and national strangers merged with “Americans”. In spite of all the pressure the old people could bring to bear, the children of each ethnic group denied their background and their ancestral language. Something was loose in this land, and the new generations wanted to be Americans more than they wanted to be Hungarians or Italians or British. And in one or two, certainly not more than three generations, each ethnic group has clicked into place in the union without losing the pluribus.

One of the generalizations most often noted about Americans is that we are a restless, a dissatisfied, a searching people. We spend out time searching for security, and hate it when we get it. We are an intemperate people: we eat too much, drink too much, indulge our senses too much. We work too hard, and many die under the strain; and we play with violence just as suicidal. The result is that we seem to be in a state of turmoil all the time, both physically and mentally. We are able to believe that our government is weak, stupid, overbearing, dishonest, and inefficient, and at the same time, we are deeply convinced that it is the best government in the world, and we would like to impose it on everyone else.

Americans seem to live and breathe and function by paradox; but in nothing are we so paradoxical as in our passionate belief in our own myths. We shout that we are a nation of laws, not men – and then proceed to break every law we can if we can get away with it. Our most persistent folktales – constantly retold in books, movies, and television shows – concern cowboys, gun-slinging sheriffs and Indian fighters. The brave and honest sheriff who with courage and a six-gun brings law and order to a Western community is perhaps our most familiar hero. And in these moral tales, so deep-set in us, virtue
does not arise out or reason or orderly process of law – it is imposed by violence and maintained by threat of violence.

8- I wonder whether this fold wisdom is the story of our capability. Are these stories permanent because we know within ourselves that only the threat of violence makes it possible for us to live together in peace?

No one can define the “American Way of Life” or point to any person or group who lives it, but it is real nevertheless.

Our means of governing ourselves, while it derives from European or Asian sources, is unique. That it works at all is astonishing; that it works well is a matter for amazement. In thinking about conferring the blessings of our system on other people, we forget that ours is the product of our own history, which has not been duplicated anywhere else. We have amassed a set of feelings which grew out of our background, but which are just as strongly held when we do not know that background.

For example, Americans almost without exception have a fear and a hatred of any perpetuation of power – political, religious or bureaucratic. Whether this anxiety stems from what amounts to a folk memory of our own revolution against the England of George III, or whether in the family background of all Americans from all parts of the world there is an alert memory of the foreign tyrannies which were the cause of their coming here in the first place, it is hard to say. Regardless, any official with a power potential causes in Americans first a restiveness, then suspicion and finally – if the official remains in office to long – a downright general animosity. Many a public servant has been voted out of office for no other reason than it has been too long.

In nothing are the Americans so strange as in their attitudes toward their children. I have studied children in many countries, and I find nothing to approximate the American child-sickness. Before it appeared, parents were delighted to have children at all and content that they might grow up to be exactly like themselves. Farm boys grew up farmers; housewives trained their daughters to be housewives. Population explosions were taken care of by wars, plagues and starvation.

13- Our child-sickness has developed very rapidly in the last 60 years, and it runs parallel, it would seem, with increasing material plenty and the medical conquest of child-killing diseases. Suddenly it was no longer acceptable that the child should be like his parents and live as they did; he must live better, know more, dress more richly, and if possible, change from his father’s trade to a profession. Since it was demanded of the child that he be better than his parents, he must be guided, pushed, admired, disciplined, flattered and forced. But since the parents were and are no better than they are, the rules they propounded were not based on their experiences but on their wishes and hopes.

If the hope was not fulfilled, the parents went into a tailspin of guilt, blaming themselves for having done something wrong or at least something not right. This feeling of the parents was happily seized upon by the children, for it allowed them to be failures through no fault of their own. Laziness, sloppiness, indiscipline, selfishness and general piggery, which are the natural talents of children and were once slapped out of them, now became either crimes of the parents or sickness in the children, who would far rather be sick than disciplined.

Into this confusion the experts entered, and American parents put their troubles, and their children, in the hands of the professionals – doctors, educators, psychologists, neurologists, psychiatrists. The only trouble was and is that few of the
professionals agreed with one another except in the belief that the child should always be the center of attention – an attitude which has the full support of the children.

16- I have been putting off writing about the most serious problem that Americans are faced with, both as people and as individuals. We discuss it constantly, and yet there is not even a name for it. Immortality does not describe it, nor does lack of integrity, nor does dishonesty. Many people, not able to face the universal spread and danger of the cancerous growth, split off a fragment of the whole to worry about or to try to cure.

But I begin to think that the evil is one thing, not many; that racial unrest, the emotional crazy quilt that drives our people to the psychiatrists, the fallout, dropout, copout insurgency of our children and young people, the rush to stimulant as well as hypnotic drugs, the rise of narrow, ugly, vengeful cults of all kinds, the distrust and revolt against all authority – this in a time of plenty such as has never been known – I think all of these are manifestations of one single cause.

I'm not going to preach about any good old days. By our standards of comfort they were pretty awful. What did they have then that we are losing or have lost? For one thing, they had rules – rules concerning life, limb and property; rules governing department and manners; and finally rules defining dishonesty, dishonor, misconduct and crime. The rules were not always obeyed, but they were believe in, and a breaking of them was savagely punished. The rule-breaker knew he was wrong and the others were right. The rules were understood and accepted by everyone.

Adlai Stevenson, speaking of a politician of particularly rancid practices, once said, “If he were a bad man, I wouldn't be so afraid of him. But this man has no principles. He doesn't know the difference.” Could this be our difficulty – that gradually we are losing our ability to tell the difference? The rules fall away in chunks, and in the vacant place we have a generality: “It's all right because everybody does it.”

20- We are also poisoned with things. Having many things seems to create a desire for more things. Think of the pure horror of Christmases when children tear open package after package and then, when the floor is heaped with wrappings and presents, say, “Is that all?” And two days later the smashed and abandoned “things” are added to our national trash pile, and perhaps the child, having got in trouble, explains, “I didn’t have anything to do.” And he means exactly that – nothing to do, nowhere to go, no direction, no purpose, and worst of all, no needs.

It is probable that the want of things and the need of things have been the two greatest stimulants toward the change and complication we call progress. And surely we Americans, most of us starting with nothing, have contributed our share of wanting. Wanting is probably a valuable human trait. It is the means of getting that can be dangerous.

The evil that threatens us came quickly and quietly, came from many directions and was the more dangerous because it wore the face of good. Almost unlimited new machine power took the place of straining muscles and bent backs. Medicine and hygiene cut down infant mortality almost to the vanishing point, and at the same time extended our life-span. Leisure came to us before we knew what to do with it, and all of these good things falling on us unprepared constitute calamity. We have the things, and we have not had time to develop a way of thinking about them.

I strongly suspect that our moral and spiritual disintegration grows out of our lack of experience with the plenty. We had a million years to get used to the idea of fire and only 20 to prepare ourselves for the productive-destructive tidal
wave of atomic fission. Our babies live, and we have no work for their hands. We retire men and women at the age of their best service for not other reason than that we need their jobs for younger people. To allow ourselves the illusion of usefulness, we have standby crews for functions which no longer exist.

24- Why do we act the way we do? I believe it is because we have reached the end of a road and have discovered no new path to take, no duty to carry out, no purpose to fulfill. I think we will find a path to the future, but its direction may be unthinkable to us now.

Something happened in America to create the Americans. Now we face the danger which in the past has been most destructive to the human: success, plenty, comfort and ever-increasing leisure. No dynamic people has ever survived these dangers. If the anesthetic of self-satisfaction were added to our hazards, we would not have a chance of survival – as Americans.

But I expect that we will survive as Americans. A dying people tolerates the present, rejects the future and finds satisfaction in the past greatness and half-remembered glory. It is in the American negation of these symptoms of extinction that my hope and confidence lie. We are not satisfied. Our restlessness is still with us. Young Americans are rebellious, angry, searching. The energy pours our in rumbles, in strikes and causes, even in crime – but it is energy. Wasted energy is only a little problem compared with the lack of it.

The world is open as it has never been before, and for the first time in human experience we have the tools to work with. Three fifths of the world and perhaps four fifths of the world’s wealth lie under the sea, and we can get to it. The sky is open at last, and we have the means to rise into it.

We are in the perplexing period of change. We seem to be running in all directions at once – but we are running. And I believe that our history, our experience in America, has endowed us for the change that is coming. We have cut ourselves off from the self-abuse of war by raising it from a sin to an extinction. Far larger experiences are open to our restlessness – the fascinating unknown is everywhere.

29- How will we Americans act and react to a new set of circumstances for which new rules must be made? We will make mistakes; we always have. But from our beginning, in hindsight at least, our social direction is clear. We have moved to become one people out of many. We have failed sometimes, taken wrong paths, paused for renewal, filled our bellies and licked our wounds. But we have never slipped back – never.