I AM AT AN outdoor music festival. I am sitting with friends when a dark cloud rolls in. All of a sudden, sheets of rain start pouring down. Out come umbrellas, raincoats, ponchos. Even these don’t really keep us dry. My wife and I go stand beneath a shelter which a lady nearby has put up for her family. She gladly lets people huddle under the canvas. The music continues through all of this, since the performing stages are dry.

Someone says, “I hope this isn’t telling us about the whole festival.” People nod in agreement. Does this sudden, fierce rainstorm predict the weather for the next four days? Is this festival going to be burdened and troubled with all sorts of problems? We are asking, is this storm a metaphor? Does the storm tell us about something else?

And all these umbrellas, various sizes and colors, which have filled the field. The ponchos which have suddenly become so important. These are metaphors also. These are like shields from life’s attacks. Protection against the rain of fate.

I hear the words of the songs. They tell us stories about people we do not know, but we relate these stories to ourselves. “You said you loved me but….” “I took the next train….” What happened to the people in the songs is similar to what has happened to us. We construct metaphors in our minds out of the lyrics.

For many years I have been writing about metaphors. A metaphor asserts an identity between things we usually think of as separate. A metaphor unifies disparate concepts. On this day, huddled against the rain, listening to music, metaphors abound.

The music itself coaxes our brains into sympathetic vibration. We move our bodies in time with the music. Even in the rainstorm, people are dancing. Physical unity and social unity. People are together, sharing the identity forged by the music and their consciousness. Metaphors being enacted all around.

It is one of those wonderful times. In a rainstorm, dancing, together, relating in our own way to music, lyrics, and the people with us. We are each part of a larger unified group. Our purpose is self-expression and joy. We have been seized by metaphors, our minds constructing identities all around us.

The rain ended. Other bands came to play. The festival went on. The metaphors faded into the background. But for a brief moment, metaphors were everywhere.

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Most Americans think of themselves as middle-class. But increasingly we are becoming a nation divided between economic winners and losers. Today the top fifth of households absorb more than half the nation’s yearly income and close to 70 percent of its wealth — a portion that has steadily grown over the past 20 years. Meanwhile, many pillars of the middle-class American dream are crumbling. Wages have stagnated. Jobs have disappeared by the hundreds of thousands. Employment is becoming less secure; higher education and housing are becoming more expensive; health insurance is becoming less available. Even promised pensions are vanishing as large corporations sue the courts to escape their obligations.

In *The American Dream vs. The Gospel of Wealth*, Norton Garfinkle employs historical insight and data-based economic analysis to demonstrate compellingly the sharp departure of the supply-side Gospel of Wealth (the economic theory that is currently in vogue) from an American ideal that dates back to Abraham Lincoln. In that ideal, America is a society in which ordinary, hard-working individuals can get ahead and attain a middle-class living, and in which government plays an active role in expanding opportunities and ensuring against economic exploitation. Supply side economic policies increase economic disparities, and, Garfinkle insists, fail on technical, factual, moral, and political grounds.

These days, many Americans are feeling uneasy about their financial circumstances and the economy, despite outwardly good economic performance numbers. They sense that there might be something amiss in an economic program that disparages the progressivity of the tax code, desires to change the firm commitment to Social Security, and views health care for the least fortunate among us as something our affluent society can not afford. For an outline of a fresh economic vision, consonant with a great American tradition of ensuring strong economic growth while preserving the middle-class American dream, I suggest reading this book.

Since the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, many Americans and others have accused the Bush administration of ripping the United States away from a tradition of cooperative diplomacy by violently overthrowing foreign governments. Stephen Kinzer believes that the opposite is true, that the Bush administration is actually following a long-established American tradition.

Beginning with the ouster of Hawaii’s monarchy in 1893, and continuing through the Spanish-American War, the Cold War, and the “war on terror,” the United States has deposed governments in fourteen foreign countries. Many of these “regime change” operations, Kinzer argues, have destroyed democracies, led to the rise of dictators, and thrown entire regions of the world into upheaval. Their long term-consequences have been disastrous not only for the target countries but also for the United States. The CIA coup in Iran is a case in point.

The United States was beloved in Iran until 1953. In that year, we overthrew the only democratic government Iran ever had. This was the beginning of Iran’s drift toward radicalism.

The CIA coup in Iran brought the Shah to power. His increasingly repressive rule ultimately set off the Islamic Revolution of 1979. That revolution brought bitterly anti-American clerics to power and inspired Islamic radicals around the world. Had we not overthrown the Iranian government half a century ago, Iran might be a mature democracy today, and the Middle East might look very different.

Kinzer notes that for better or worse, the United States is going to continue to be an interventionist power. Our position in the world makes this inevitable. The question is can we intervene more effectively, in ways that promote stability rather than instability. Kinzer maintains, if we look back at our past interventions, and understand why many of them have gone so terribly wrong, that such intervention is possible. I certainly hope he’s right.

*MARTIN H. LEVINSON, PHD*

What are our impulses, wants, and needs? Where do these desires come from?

How can we rein in these desires? William D. Irvine, a philosophy professor at Wright State University, explores these and other questions in *On Desire: Why We Want What We Want.*

In his search for information on desire, Irvine investigates writers like Seneca, Tolstoy, and Freud as well as the teachings of Buddhists, Hindus, the Amish, Shakers, the Catholic saints, ancient Greeks and Romans, and modern European philosophers. (Buddha said “Satisfy the necessity of life like the butterfly that sips the flower, without destroying its fragrance or texture.”) He looks at what science can tell us about desire — what happens in the brain when we desire something and how animals evolved particular desires. (“We humans are incentivized. All humans have implanted within us a biological incentive system...because our evolutionary ancestors who had it had a better chance of surviving and reproducing than those who didn’t.”) And he probes into the motivations of those who let their destinies be formed by the desires of other people, and individuals who refuse to relinquish sovereignty over themselves. (Thoreau said “There is some advantage in being the humblest, cheapest, least dignified man in the village, so that the very stable boys shall damn you. Methinks I enjoys that advantage to an unusual extent.”)

Irvine concludes that the best way to attain lasting happiness is not to change the world around us or our place in it, but to change ourselves. If we can convince ourselves to want what we already have, we can dramatically enhance our happiness. That sounds reasonable to me. The trick is to do it.

*Martin H. Levinson, PhD*