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Chapter 1

If You Knew You Couldn't Fail . . .

I was in the car, running last-minute errands for the Christmas holiday, when I heard a radio talk show host pose this question: *If you knew you could not fail, what would you do?* The host encouraged listeners to call in with their answers and, almost immediately, the station's phone lines lit up. Everyone had ideas to share: visions of fame and fortune, dreams about romance or happiness, healthy families, yearnings for exciting futures filled with adventure. People started sharing and I couldn't stop listening.

Before long, I began to quiz myself: *If you knew you couldn't fail, what would you do?* My mind raced a bit. I'd write a best-selling novel or a hit Broadway musical—maybe I'd even appear in it! I'd be a prize-winning photographer or hard-hitting journalist—the kind who wins a Pulitzer Prize. Maybe I would start my own business—a chic restaurant, a designer floral shop, or perhaps I would train dogs; I always loved them. I could start a think tank and research issues impacting social justice policy. I was amazed. There seemed no shortage of possibilities. The list went on and on, all imaginings of things I had dreamed about at one time or another, though none matched the path my life had taken.

FIG. 1.1. Mom the Lounge Singer
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I found myself asking the question of more and more people. *If you knew you couldn't fail, what would you do?* My coauthor responded, "I'd be the next Oprah . . . or maybe I'd become a lawyer, one internationally known for fighting social injustice. And, for sure, I would live in Cape May—right on the ocean!" A few days later, we posed the question to friends and relatives at the Christmas dinner table. Mom, still dreaming in her nineties, said, "I would become a lounge singer. I've always wanted to sing. I would just love doing that every night of the week." Never too young to dream, our nephew, then ten years old, said, "I'd either be a soccer star or a famous computer game designer," seeing both with equal appeal. More answers soon flowed from family and friends: "I'd have my own exclusive bed and breakfast," "I would paint," "be an inspirational speaker," "run a PAC," "be a major-league pitcher," "I'd live at the shore," "travel the world over and over," "I'd be president of the United States."

The dreams shared with us were often surprising, but one thing was certain. Everyone at the table had dreams, and they shared them easily and without hesitation. Even more striking was this: no one at the table was horribly sad or unhappy; they were not living a life of regret. In fact, many people said that, while they had dreams, they were also quite happy with their lives. Yet young or old, happy or sad, rich or just getting by, everyone was willing to consider a different, perhaps a loftier possibility. For those radio callers . . . for us . . . for our friends and relatives, dreaming seemed easy—in fact, it seemed to come naturally.

This experience got us thinking more and more about dreams. What does it mean to dream—to imagine your future possibilities? Does everyone do it no matter what their reality? And what do our dreams look like? Do they unfold in uniquely personal ways, or are they patterned, following some sort of cultural scripts or "lessons"? We wondered too: how do people's dreams differ from age to age, from group to group, from context to context? Finally, do people ever fail to dream or simply stop dreaming? If so, why?

If we thought about dreams from a psychoanalytic perspective, the idea of patterned dreams would likely be discarded. For the psychoanalyst, such daydreams and imaginings are a way of revealing every individual's particular repressed desires. Thus, identical dreams can often mean vastly different things based on a person's biography and emotional development. On the other hand, historians, anthropologists, and even some sociologists would say that dreams are highly patterned. In fact, among Americans, many would contend that dreams can be largely reduced to one thing: the "American Dream"—a singular focus on prosperity and success.

In *Dreams of a Lifetime*, we would like to propose a middle ground. While dreams are generally treated as personal and

unique, we argue that people's dreams are quite clearly patterned in very predictable ways. However, people's dreams are not homogenous recreations of the American Dream. Rather, people's dreams differ from age to age, from group to group, from context to context. More specifically, one's "social location"—that is, where class, race, gender, stage of life, or unexpected disruptions to one's life narrative place a person in the broader society—shapes what, when, how, and if we dream.

Most people understand that class, race, gender, age, and tragedy can create inequities in life's opportunities. But we are told that, in dreaming, anything is possible. Can social location really invade our private imaginings of the future? We argue that it can, and in this book, we will show how one's social location shapes the seemingly private life of our minds. We are all free to dream. Yet, we will show that our dreams are restricted in ways of which we are not fully aware. Our social location seeps into our mind's eye, quietly influencing what and how we dream, whether we embrace dreaming or simply give up on it, whether we believe our dreams—whether realistic or fantastical—can come true, and whether we try to make them come true. So Jiminy Cricket's promise, "When you wish upon a star, makes no difference who you are. Anything your heart desires will come to you," may be true for some. But for others, it is a false promise. Given this, studying dreams provides a new avenue for a better understanding of inequality—inequality that is deep-seated in the mind and often precedes action or outcome.[1]

What Do We Mean by "Dreams"?

In the social sciences, there has been an enormous amount of work on concepts we might call the "cousins" of dreams. For example, psychologists, social psychologists, and economists

have written reams about what they call "aspirations" and "achievement motivation." Most of this work examines people's educational and career goals, and such studies accomplish three major tasks: they explore how people develop plans or roadmaps for the future; they detail the concrete, often patterned actions people take to achieve their schooling or job-related goals; and they illustrate the social foundations of aspirations, showing how aspirations vary by gender, race, and socioeconomic status.[2] Some sociologists study a similar concept, writing about "projects." According to Iddo Tavory and Nina Eliasoph, projects involve rational, willed actions and plans made in relation to others and aimed at a specific end. As Ann Mische and Pippa Pattison note, these projects do not necessarily emerge from a single individual. Rather, projects are likely collectively planned interventions that are designed to organize the concrete relationships one finds in changing political or social arenas.[3] What is important here is this: aspirations, achievement motivations, and projects involve planning. Once you set a goal or objective, you must develop a strategy for achieving it.

"Hope," another cousin of dreams, has attracted social scientists' attentions as well.[4] Hope involves a wish for something—something considered truly possible to achieve.[5] Thus, like aspirations and projects, hope has a footing in concrete experience. In fact, hope often develops as a response to a situation, a particular event, a problem, or some developmental standard or benchmark.[6] You discover you are ill and you hope to be cured; you discover your job is in jeopardy and you hope you'll retain your position; you fall in love and hope for a successful relationship or become pregnant and hope for a healthy child; you face crippling debt and hope you purchased a winning lottery ticket; in the face of terror or political strife, you hope for

peace, safety, and unity. As Jerome Groopman writes in *The Anatomy of Hope*, "Hope can arrive only when you recognize that there are real options and that you have genuine choices. Hope can flourish only when you believe that what you do can make a difference, that your actions can bring a future different from the present."[7] Groopman's definition perhaps explains why hope has become part of our political lexicon. Politicians promote it as a concrete strategy for meaningful change. Remember the "Man from Hope," Bill Clinton, or Barack Obama's mantra of "Hope and Change?" Moreover, hope is compatible with the culture of optimism that so characterizes American culture in particular.[8] People generally hope for positive things or things that will directly benefit them.

Aspirations, projects, and hopes are related to dreams, yet they are not quite the same. Dreams are their own unique "beast." Unlike these other phenomena, dreams are imaginings that are not necessarily rational, observable, or linked to planned patterns of action or concrete outcomes. Dreams do not articulate a roadmap for achievement or the path to a specific end. In some ways, dreams are akin to what Jens Beckert calls "fictional expectations"—unobservable states that may or may not materialize.[9] In fact, as we will see, many dreams present unlikely scenarios. Nonetheless, we envision these futures for ourselves. Thus, dreams are mental exercises that provide a vision of a person's inner self; they are a way by which people get to know themselves. Dreams tell us where a person's bliss lies—their ambitions, ideals, and desires—all expressed in the seeming freedom of an imagined world. As one of our study participants told us, "Dreaming is a healthy way of just thinking about what matters to you and kind of keeping hold of who you are and what's important."[10]

It is easy to illustrate the difference between aspirations, projects, or hopes and what we call dreams. Suppose you aspire

to be a lounge singer. Chances are you will develop a concrete plan or project designed to help you achieve that goal. You may set up a practice schedule to hone your craft. You may try to make contacts, apply for jobs in various establishments, perhaps frequent "open mic" nights, and so on. In contrast, dreams of lounge singing are a fait accompli: they are about desired outcomes, not processes. The person who dreams of being a lounge singer occupies a different "space." The dream presents someone as the focal point of a small community, as a person enjoying the spotlight of that community's attention and praise, as someone living in a world where their work is a "labor of love." Dreams of lounge singing likely do not include plans and schedules or the struggle of minimal income; they do not include thoughts of working in potentially dangerous or unseemly environments, heavy exposure to alcohol and second-hand smoke, repetition and boredom, or even a true assessment of one's actual talent. Rather, in dreams of lounge singing, one has "arrived" at a desired end. The dream is a vehicle that articulates one's essence, one's desire to be creative, giving, independent, to be someone existing in a context where they matter, where they are sought after and appreciated.

Now consider someone who hopes to be president of the United States. Such a person likely grounds this hope in some sort of experience. The presidential hopeful may have been inspired by a political role model; she or he may have worked on a political campaign or had a taste of politics in a school or local election. Once hope is kindled, the person takes steps to move forward and keep the hope alive. In this way, a presidential hopeful might begin by seeking elected office in her or his local town, county, or state; she or he might become involved in party politics, assemble a cadre of advisors to help with image and public relations, and create a network of potential donors.

Dreams of becoming president of the United States are something quite different. Such dreams are likely filled with the satisfaction and the intoxication of power, with musings about the ability to control an era's problems and challenges, to establish order in the face of chaos or comfort in the face of disturbance, to be the most important person in the world. Dreams of a presidency likely ignore elements such as personal danger, onerous burden, continuous criticism, and highly consequential failures. Rather, the dream provides a safe haven in which to articulate one's desire to be a strong, confident, wise, even a worshipped leader who has power and centrality.

If dreams are not directly linked to action or actual outcomes, why should we study them? We argue that dreams about who we wish to be or what our perfect world would look like can tell us something important about a person's essence, their identity and sense of self, about the things they value and why they value them, about how they communicate with themselves. But there is something more. Dreams represent the starting point of our perception of "fit." Where do we want to belong? Where do we wish we could land? What life paths would we take if no obstacles existed? What do we feel we deserve? Dreams tell this story—even before the story is lived. And it is a story built from the cultural lessons to which we are exposed in our daily social interactions and the cultural contexts in which we live and learn.

How Did We Examine Dreams?

To pursue our analysis of dreams, we tapped a variety of data sources. Primarily, we used interviews and focus groups to talk about dreams with people of different social backgrounds—people with different pasts, presents, and futures. Economically

speaking, we talked to people who were just getting by, who were up and coming, and those who were affluent and comfortable. We tapped different racial and gender groups—Asians, Blacks, Latinx, Multiracials, and Whites; men and women. We spoke to people at very different stages of life: people at the "starting line" (for us, third and fourth graders); people crossing thresholds that lead to adulthood—high-school seniors, and college juniors and seniors. We also talked to people who were closer to the "finish line"—retirees and other senior citizens. We talked to people at special turning points in life: newlyweds, new parents, and recent immigrants. We also talked to people facing serious hardships—poverty, homelessness, serious medical diagnoses, or unemployment.

In addition to talking to people, we looked at how dreams are represented in American popular culture. We combed through American public culture to identify the extensive storehouse of both positive and negative lessons, stories and images on dreaming. We also made use of surveys, polls, and other secondary data that report on people's dreams at various moments in time. At times, such data became touchstones for a comparison of our respondents and those located in other places and times.

Dreams of a Lifetime focuses predominantly on the experience of people living in the United States, though we hope to do a follow-up study comparing our U.S. findings with those collected from other nations. We chose the United States as a starting point because, as two sociologists who have devoted their careers to the study of American culture, we know that dreams are at the core of the American experience. There is something distinctive about dreaming in America. The practice is central to the national narrative. Indeed, there is a popular worldwide view that America is where dreams are fulfilled.

Anyone born in the United States after 1931 grew up in a world where John Trunslow Adams's concept of the "American Dream" was a pivotal part of our cultural lessons. Cultural planner Lawrence Samuel argues that the American Dream "plays a vital, active role in who we are, what we do, and why we do it. No other idea or mythology—even religion—has as much influence on our individual and collective lives."[11] Of course, this sentiment existed well before Adams's label. As Jim Cullen so eloquently recounts,

> The Pilgrims may not have actually talked about the American Dream, but they would have understood the idea; after all, they lived it as people who imagined a destiny for themselves. So did the Founding Fathers. So did illiterate immigrants who could not speak English but intuitively expressed rhythms of the Dream with their hands and their hearts. What Alexis de Toqueville called "the charm of anticipated success" in his classic *Democracy in America* seemed palpable to him not only in the 1830s but in his understanding of American history for two hundred years before that. And it still seems so almost two hundred years later.[12]

There have been several impressive histories of the American Dream, as well as books that explore its pitfalls and failings.[13] While we acknowledge the pivotal role of the American Dream, we do not seek to retell its story, for it has been fully explored. We mention the American Dream simply because the concept encourages dreaming and optimism as a viable—indeed, an expected—activity among those living in the United States. The American Dream is a cultural lesson that creates a context or a space for such imaginings, making it important to acknowledge.

Where Will This Book Take You?

Dreams of a Lifetime will cover lots of ground. In chapter 2, we deal with the dreams themselves—those future imaginings that people shared with us in focus groups and interviews. Using the voices of our 272 respondents, we recount the content of people's dreams—the breadth of dream *themes* addressed by our participants and the *feasibility* of their dreams. We then move on to explore several additional facets of what and how people dream, including their *reach* (are they long- or short-terms images?), their *clarity* (are people's dreams highly detailed and easily understood or more abstract in nature?), their *social scope* (who and what is included in them?), their *flexibility* (are dream themes fixed and consistent or do they exhibit variety or change over time?), their *longevity* (how long do people hold on to their dreams?), their *transportability* (do people intend to pass on their dreams?), their *grounding* (do people's dreams realistically reflect their talents and abilities; are they likely to occur?), and the level of *control* people attach to their dreams (can people affect a dream's fruition?).[14] Finally, we explore the level of *importance* people attribute to the act of dreaming. Does everyone dream . . . should they . . . and when, if ever, should one relinquish one's dreams?

In chapter 3, we try to better understand where the substance of dreams come from. If, as we have argued, dreams do not simply reflect the tenets of the American Dream nor an individual's unique fantasies, then there must be a middle ground. Here, we try to better describe that middle ground of dreaming. We begin by identifying publicly accessible cultural lessons on dreaming. We then examine how those lessons become ingrained in people's bodies and minds. The public culture of dreaming includes many lessons—narratives, stories, and

scripts that are both positive and negative. Again, using the voices of our respondents, we focus on which of those lessons drive people's dreams and how they use those lessons to build and articulate their dreams.[15] We also ask, Are people's dreams something about which they consciously deliberate and can easily articulate? Or are they somewhat unconscious, seemingly automatic responses that people make without being able to fully explain where the dreams come from or what they truly mean? Both cognitive scientists and cognitive sociologists are asking exciting questions about our thoughts and desires, wondering how conscious and deliberative we are in defining our values, attitudes, wants, and perceptions of the world. Our respondents help us explore such ongoing debates.[16]

In the remaining chapters of *Dreams of a Lifetime*, we concentrate on subsets of our study participants. Social class, race, gender, life course position, and ruptures to life narratives influenced our respondents' dreams in many, many ways. Here we give a few highlights of what each chapter reveals. Chapter 4 groups our respondents by social class, race, and gender, presenting important differences in how members of these groups dream. We found, for example, that people from different social classes favored different dream themes. In addition, different cultural lessons drove the dreams of those in different social classes. As we moved from lower- to upper-class respondents, we found that people reported increasingly more diverse and short-term dreaming, a greater reluctance to give up on dreams, and a greater belief that one's dreams would come true. We will present these findings and more via the voices of our participants.

When it came to race, we found important differences as well. For example, Asian, Latinx, and Multiracial respondents were concentrated dreamers; their future imaginings were often fixed in one specific area. In contrast, Black and White

respondents dreamed in more diverse ways. We also found that people of color report holding on to their dreams longer than Whites, while at the same time expressing impatience with regard to finally achieving them. Our Latinx respondents stood out as least confident about achieving their dreams and most likely to embrace negative cultural lessons on dreaming. The voices of our study participants will elaborate these and other racial differences in dreaming.

Chapter 4 ends by exploring gender and its relationship to dreaming. Among many interesting findings, we saw that twenty-first-century men and women often clung to several gender-stereotypical aspects regarding what, when, and how much they should dream. For example, women often dreamed of family and self-improvement themes, while men's dream themes often tapped adventure and fame, wealth, and power. Our study participants also showed us that women were more diverse, committed, and optimistic in dreaming than men—something surprising that we explore further in the chapter.

In chapter 5, we analyzed how dreams differ among those at various stages of life. We mention here just some of the many differences that emerged from our discussions. For example, fourth graders were the first to express dreams that were more feasible than fantastical, although most people's dreams, no matter their age, had an element of fantasy. We also found that the dreams of people at early life's socially defined transitional moments—e.g., moving to junior high or graduating from high school or college—appeared more similar to one another than to those in later stages of life. And as we moved from respondents in young adulthood to midlife to those in their senior years, we found more diversity in the dream themes people expressed. These differences represent just some of the ways in which life course position influences future imaginings.

In chapter 6, we look at people facing "ruptures" in their life narratives: those displaced by economic or natural disasters, those victimized by serious medical disease, or those who found themselves suddenly unemployed. As you will see, these conditions had many varying effects on what and how people dream. To mention just a few, we found that displaced and health-challenged respondents favored self-improvement and philanthropic dreams, while the unemployed were focused on dreams related to recovered careers. The dreams of the displaced and health challenged were most often driven by positive cultural lessons. We also found that the health challenged showed the most diversity in dreaming and that they were the most confident about achieving their dreams. Illness seemed to give these respondents a "second life" when it came to dreaming. Unemployment, in contrast, was a major obstacle to dreaming, resulting in future imaginings that were vague at best and often fueled by negative cultural lessons and a lack of control.

Chapter 7 brings our book to a close. In it, we look at some of the broader conclusions of our work. Have we proven the case for the middle ground of dreaming? Have we adequately explored how an uneven playing field with regard to future imaginings really sets the stage for the more tangible inequities in life chances and opportunities that plague those of certain social classes, races, genders, and the like? We also revisit the importance of dreaming in American culture. In so doing, we explore one last critical question. Is dreaming a positive or negative thing? The answer may surprise you.

Final Reflections

Langston Hughes once wrote of the importance of dreams, saying that without them "life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly."[17] If this sentiment is true, then learning something about

dreaming may be the most important study we can undertake. Knowing this, *Dreams of a Lifetime* will dig deep into the world of future imaginings—not simply what we dream about, how we articulate those dreams, and from where our dreams emerge, but the systematic ways in which people's dreams can differ by one's social location. Moreover, as the very foundation of who we are, or perhaps, who we "should" want to be, dreams help us explain just where the uneven social playing field begins. Exploring the culture *of* dreams and the culture *in* dreams helps us understand the role of future imaginings in social life—both for the good and the bad.

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