

THE NEW BETTER OFF: REINVENTING THE AMERICAN DREAM BY COURTNEY E. MARTIN



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Review

"I've been waiting for someone to articulate what the brilliant Courtney Martin has done in *The New Better Off*. The book poses a question that I believe is critical to our families, our culture, our nation: What does it mean and who gets to determine what a good life, a safe life, a happy life and generous life looks like? And how did we get to this place where to be well-off means to be constantly busy and tired and distracted, disconnected from our families and communities? I hope everyone reads this book and examines what matters most in their lives, and in the life of our society. "

—Elizabeth Lesser, author *Marrow and Broken Open*, and cofounder of Omega Institute

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To be sure, people need jobs. They need housing. They need healthcare. When these basic needs aren't met, and for too many Americans, they aren't, we are legitimately not better off.

But for many of us, “better off” is far more abstract than putting food on the table. Is “better off” a fancy job title, a bank account with more zeros, a manicured lawn? It turns out that none of those things automatically make you safe or happy, as evidenced by the Great Recession when the ground underneath so many Americans’ feet shifted overnight. And, what’s more, some of the things we have historically associated with success actually endanger your health. Underneath the appearance of uplift, a complex story weighs us down—ethnic last names erased, authentic, albeit nontraditional, career ambitions set aside for something more lucrative, a father who knows his colleagues better than his own kids, a mother who leans in so hard she falls flat on her face, a lot of pressure and debt, a lack of presence, living for the weekends, living someone else’s dream. “Better off,” left un-interrogated, can be fucking dangerous.

For me, this is not just a societally important matter, but one with personal significance as well. I was just minding my own business—sweating on subway platforms at 2am and getting weepy over rejection emails from editors and losing track of time while laying on blankets with dear friends in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park and dreaming about the person I would one day be, and then—all the sudden—I was that person. Otherwise known as an adult. I had a husband (something I never thought I’d have). I had a daughter (something I always thought I’d have). I had a job. Well, actually, a lot of jobs. I had a car payment. I had no small amount of frustration when the kid next door played his music too loud on a weeknight (to be fair, I think it was pretty bad music).

And I had a problem. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to become a responsible person. I’ve always been sort of an old soul—watching Oprah with a bag of Ruffles potato chips after middle school so I could try on all the grown up emotions of her guests. Commitment doesn’t send me scurrying like it does some people. I like feeling needed. I like being accountable. I believe in sensible shoes.

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And as it turned out, the white picket fence was beyond my reach anyway, and beyond the reach of so many people. When the economy plummeted in 2007, it robbed so many Americans, especially the young, of some of the experiences that—up until that point—were widely considered the cornerstones of a successful adult life. Suddenly, owning a home and having a 9-to-5 job were stripped of their former glimmer, revealed to be more complicated and maybe even less satisfying than we’d been told. People put off getting married, in part, because they felt like they were supposed to be somebody else when they did it—somebody more financially secure, more established, more sure.

In other words, when the economy crashed, the air was let out of the overinflated ego of the so-called American Dream. I had been scared of what adulthood might do to the state of my soul; I feared chasing symbols of success, rather than creating conditions for meaning and joy and justice, but—as fate would have it—the symbols were outrunning everyone.

Since then, so many people continue to reevaluate, turning away from job opportunities that are prestigious but not courageous, making families out of friends and neighbors, buying less, giving away more, sharing and renting rather than owning, reinventing rituals and ritualizing reinvention. So many people are looking compassionately and critically at their own parents’ lives and choosing to do things differently, sometimes

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Are we living the good life—and what defines 'good,' anyway? Americans today are constructing a completely different framework for success than their parents' generation, using new metrics that TED speaker and *On Being* columnist Courtney Martin has termed collectively the "New Better Off." The *New Better Off* puts a name to the American phenomenon of rejecting the traditional dream of a 9-to-5 job, home ownership, and a nuclear family structure—illuminating the alternate ways Americans are seeking happiness and success.

Including commentary on recent changes in how we view work, customs and community, marriage, rituals, money, living arrangements, and spirituality, *The New Better Off* uses personal stories and social analysis to explore the trends shaping our country today. Martin covers growing topics such as freelancing, collaborative consumption, communal living, and the breaking down of gender roles.

The New Better Off is about the creative choices individuals are making in their vocational and personal lives, but it's also about the movements, formal and informal, that are coalescing around the *New Better Off* idea—people who are reinventing the social safety net and figuring out how to truly better their own communities.

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Features

- *The New Better Off Reinventing the American Dream*

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philosophical conversations. I didn't want to get a good job, a house with a white picket fence, have 2.5 kids, and then just...go...to...sleep.

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Most helpful customer reviews

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

The manifesto and handbook for the next 'civic' generation

By E. Kolawole

We will look back on this book and say, "Thank goodness someone was brave enough to write this down."

This book rests, for me, alongside Anne Lamott's "Bird by Bird" and Paulo Coelho's "The Alchemist". Courtney Martin confirms that, when it comes to the reigning definitions of success and wealth we've adopted (primarily in the U.S., but also beyond), the whisper of doubt many of us now experience is more than worth heeding. Courtney is also a fantastic writer. She doesn't hint at or brush up against our more profound challenges. She crashes into them, bringing to bear the full force of an expert researcher and wordsmith. She fiercely hugs the reader with each sentence. Each hug is a reminder that they are richly deserving of dignity, community and a path to their dreams. I could go on, but I'd rather you not take a second longer before starting in on this wonderful book.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

This puts so much of what I've been thinking about into words

By Sarah Kathleen Peck

How do you create a community that you can trust and love and live within? What is it mean to be a woman or a man at the home and at work? How do we define ritual in a world that is increasingly secular? How does this all relate to living a great life and asking meaningful questions? Courtney Martin does an incredible job of articulating these questions, their historical precedents, and ways that everyday people are starting to deviate from the norm across the board. And perhaps it's not the norm after all, but just a dream but never really was in the first place.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Thinking About Your Future? Here's a Very Useful Guide

By Peter Prichard

This book is written in a way that could have a profound impact on anyone of any age who is thinking about how they are going to experience their life moving forward. I do not use the word profound lightly. Courtney E. Martin has presented a view of our world that outlines how many of us are, and many more of us might, view our relationship with the most fundamental elements of our life – love, money, work, home, faith etc.

For example, she provides many statistics and references regarding how the view of home ownership is changing and why. During that discussion, she makes a compelling case for the importance of community in one's life, and gives many examples of how that is being done successfully in ways that do not require the purchase of a house. She shares research regarding the fact that those aged twenty-five through thirty-four have seen the biggest increase in unrelated adults living together and provides examples of how that is being done. She also gives evidence of how, "The growing population of aging Boomers is also inspiring a range of radical new living arrangements."

As a professional in her mid-thirties, she discusses how to change one's relationship with their digital devices, particularly their cell phone, which for many lessens the ability to be part of a community that could allow one to move forward in the healthiest manner.

She asks powerful questions throughout the book that force one to think deeply about what is and what should be important in one's life. Two questions that I found particularly compelling are, "What can I let go of because it's somebody else's idea of what would make me secure/happy/accomplished?" The second is, "Who are my people and how can I build a life where I am with them more of the time in a less distracted way?" She closes the book with a list of twenty other questions that help readers identify meaningful next steps.

Finally, she writes in a very conversational tone that draws one into her story about a new way of looking at one's life. She used the same writing style in a previous book titled, *Do It Anyway: The New Generation of Activists* which is a valuable resource for those with a social conscience or a desire to help our world be a better place. I highly recommend both books.

See all 19 customer reviews...

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Courtney E. Martin is an author, entrepreneur, and weekly columnist for *On Being*. She has authored five books, including *Do It Anyway: The New Generation of Activists*, and *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters: How the Quest for Perfection is Harming Young Women*, and her work appears frequently in national publications such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Martin speaks widely at colleges and conferences, including TED, and has appeared on the *TODAY Show*, *Good Morning America*, *MSNBC*, and *The O'Reilly Factor*. She is the co-founder of the *Solutions Journalism Network* and *The Secret Society for Creative Philanthropy* and a recipient of the *Elie Wiesel Prize in Ethics*. She lives with her family in *Temescal Commons*, a co-housing community in Oakland. Read more about her work at courtneyemartin.com.

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For the first time in history, nearly two-thirds of Americans do not believe that the next generation will be "better off" than their parents, an opinion shared by men and women, rich and poor, alike.

To some, that may sound sad. To me, it sounds like a provocation. Better off? Based on whose standards?

To be sure, people need jobs. They need housing. They need healthcare. When these basic needs aren't met, and for too many Americans, they aren't, we are legitimately not better off.

But for many of us, "better off" is far more abstract than putting food on the table. Is "better off" a fancy job title, a bank account with more zeros, a manicured lawn? It turns out that none of those things automatically

make you safe or happy, as evidenced by the Great Recession when the ground underneath so many Americans' feet shifted overnight. And, what's more, some of the things we have historically associated with success actually endanger your health. Underneath the appearance of uplift, a complex story weighs us down—ethnic last names erased, authentic, albeit nontraditional, career ambitions set aside for something more lucrative, a father who knows his colleagues better than his own kids, a mother who leans in so hard she falls flat on her face, a lot of pressure and debt, a lack of presence, living for the weekends, living someone else's dream. "Better off," left un-interrogated, can be fucking dangerous.

For me, this is not just a societally important matter, but one with personal significance as well. I was just minding my own business—sweating on subway platforms at 2am and getting weepy over rejection emails from editors and losing track of time while laying on blankets with dear friends in Brooklyn's Prospect Park and dreaming about the person I would one day be, and then—all the sudden—I was that person. Otherwise known as an adult. I had a husband (something I never thought I'd have). I had a daughter (something I always thought I'd have). I had a job. Well, actually, a lot of jobs. I had a car payment. I had no small amount of frustration when the kid next door played his music too loud on a weeknight (to be fair, I think it was pretty bad music).

And I had a problem. It wasn't that I didn't want to become a responsible person. I've always been sort of an old soul—watching Oprah with a bag of Ruffles potato chips after middle school so I could try on all the grown up emotions of her guests. Commitment doesn't send me scurrying like it does some people. I like feeling needed. I like being accountable. I believe in sensible shoes.

The problem was that I didn't want to become an adult if it meant falling in line. I didn't want to get golden handcuffs or check my email every two seconds because I was convinced I was so important. I didn't want to laugh with my girlfriends about how sexless my marriage was over wine at book group or stay married for the kids. I didn't want to let myself off the hook because activism is for young people or utter that familiar, ugly phrase, "do as I say, not as I do." I didn't want to stop having euphoric experiences or long, wandering philosophical conversations. I didn't want to get a good job, a house with a white picket fence, have 2.5 kids, and then just...go...to...sleep.

And as it turned out, the white picket fence was beyond my reach anyway, and beyond the reach of so many people. When the economy plummeted in 2007, it robbed so many Americans, especially the young, of some of the experiences that—up until that point—were widely considered the cornerstones of a successful adult life. Suddenly, owning a home and having a 9-to-5 job were stripped of their former glimmer, revealed to be more complicated and maybe even less satisfying than we'd been told. People put off getting married, in part, because they felt like they were supposed to be somebody else when they did it—somebody more financially secure, more established, more sure.

In other words, when the economy crashed, the air was let out of the overinflated ego of the so-called American Dream. I had been scared of what adulthood might do to the state of my soul; I feared chasing symbols of success, rather than creating conditions for meaning and joy and justice, but—as fate would have it—the symbols were outrunning everyone.

Since then, so many people continue to reevaluate, turning away from job opportunities that are prestigious but not courageous, making families out of friends and neighbors, buying less, giving away more, sharing and renting rather than owning, reinventing rituals and ritualizing reinvention. So many people are looking compassionately and critically at their own parents' lives and choosing to do things differently, sometimes even reclaiming edifying, abandoned, elements of their grandparents' lives.

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