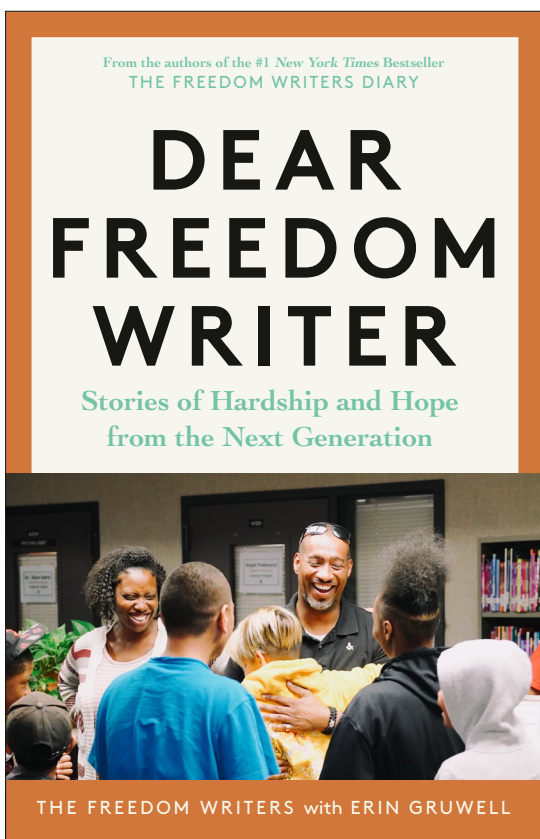


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*Dear Freedom Writer*



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## Letter 8

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### Buck Stops Here: Cost of the American Dream

Dear Freedom Writer,

“Why don’t we just go to the bank?” I asked, eagerly peering out the window of our new-to-us Pontiac. Pushing myself up on the seat to watch the neighboring vehicles, I hummed the theme songs of Saturday morning cartoons. I was always too deep in my own Power Ranger–infused world to really understand what was going on in my parents’ world at the time. *The bank is the place where money is*, I thought. So, with that logic, we should be able to go to the bank and get money. What was the big deal? Normally, people in dire circumstances wouldn’t tolerate this crap, but me being five years old, the remark managed to draw laughs from my family.

My family consists of two hard-working immigrant parents, along with my older sister and myself. The thing about my parents being the first in their families to come to America is that there was little help. They had few friends, fewer dollars, and no family to guide them. They had to piece together their American Dream from square one. The most prominent obstacle that we faced was our finances.

Money challenges littered our lives through most of the early years, spent in an apartment where the four of us slept on the same bed. The togetherness fostered by our king-sized mattress made up for our apartment complex's drab, beige exterior. But for five-year-old me, it didn't make up for the fact there was no SpongeBob to watch on our clunky, antenna-strapped TV. In order to save every dollar earned, my childhood wasn't introduced to cable TV shows like *iCarly*, *Ben 10*, and *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody*. Instead, PBS Kids was the go-to channel for any sort of entertainment for a very long time. Similarly, we rarely went out to eat or to the movies. We saved every penny we made; there was little room to negotiate.

I vividly remember one day when my dad, sister, and I went to WinCo Foods for groceries. WinCo was a massive grocery chain full of attractive items. My favorite part of the store was where they had dispensers and barrels of candies, snacks, and other goodies that you had to scoop into bags to purchase. As we walked down the never-ending aisles, my eyes fixed upon a flashy new chocolate cereal that they were giving out samples for. The sleek black-and-orange packaging called my name as I was mesmerized by the athlete advertised on the box. It was like nothing I've ever seen before. So modern and matte and mature: this had to be the cereal the big boys ate. I begged and pleaded for it. My dad, with hesitation, made the purchase, and I was bursting with excitement. It was a much-needed change from the off-brand Cheerios we normally bought. When we got home, my mom scolded us for such a careless purchase.

Why couldn't we have something new for a change? Did a couple of dollars really mean that much? I tried my best to enjoy the cereal anyway, but the saliva that once flooded my mouth

turned dry. Instead, the chocolate cereal brought a taste of bitterness.

That taste returns every time I ask my parents to spend money toward nonessentials: things like school pictures, year-books, presents for friends. I focus on price tags and note any possible way a few dollars could be spared. Why spend \$3.95 for two fancy mechanical pencils when you can get a cheap pack of ten for less? I can always scavenge for those fancy Paper Mate mechanical pencils off the floor, left behind from a previous class, anyway (better yet, I might find a Pentel plastic eraser too).

It feels like I am always walking on thin ice, regardless of if the money is there. My parents are more established now, and we've left that old apartment for a two-story house in the suburbs. But nothing is certain. I can't shake off how it felt when we were back there on that mattress in that apartment.

Dear Freedom Writer: Why do I always worry when spending a bit of money? Will I ever shake off this feeling? How much is the cost of the American Dream?

Sincerely,  
Cost-Conscious Child of Immigrants

## Response 8

### Buck Stops Here: Cost of the American Dream

Dear Cost-Conscious Child of Immigrants,  
Your parents' story proves that the pursuit of the American Dream is alive and well, but the cost of the American Dream is not the same for everybody. Most immigrants make the journey to have a better life. For some, a better life means having a job with a living wage. For others, it is the ability to have the financial stability to raise a family. Unfortunately, not having enough money impacted nearly every aspect of our lives.

For us, as first-generation Americans, it was a constant struggle between poverty and progress. Your letter spoke to me in ways that you couldn't even imagine. Growing up, the difference in our family's income affected not just the quality of food but also how we spent most of our free time.

Like you, I grew up poor. I lived in a one-bedroom apartment. My parents slept in the living room on a sofa bed, and my sisters and I in the bedroom. In school, my sisters and I ate breakfast and lunch for free. My parents could not afford to send all four of us to school with a packed lunch. The staple of our diet was pinto beans and rice. We could not afford to eat out all

the time, but my sisters and I enjoyed every delicious opportunity. Our parents treated us to McDonald's at \$0.34 a hamburger. On Sundays, if we behaved, we had doughnuts for breakfast and went to church. Sugar before church was not a smart choice, and now I know why I was borderline obese as a kid. The quality of food growing up was not the healthiest, but I wouldn't trade my upbringing for anything in the world.

You made me feel nostalgic when you mentioned Saturday morning cartoons. Cartoons were a constant in my life, and they were a way for me to escape reality into a new world, an animated world where I forgot about the struggles of living in poverty as a first-generation American. I knew I was poor because I did not play organized sports, take piano lessons, or go camping on weekends. Like you, we did not have cable. We had to accept local channels that played telenovelas (a type of soap opera) and reruns of *The Wonder Years* or *CHiPs*. Unlike you, my sisters and I woke up to *The Smurfs*, *Scooby-Doo*, and *Transformers*.

The cost of the American Dream was different for us. We both shied away from asking our parents for money when it came to school supplies. Fall was supposed to be full of exciting things: new shoes, new clothes, and school essentials. For us, it was about spending less and accepting our circumstances.

My parents believed they were living the American Dream, but it didn't seem like it to me at the time. I struggled with being poor. My classmates made fun of my hand-me-downs. I ate beans and rice every day and doughnuts on weekends. I watched cartoons and did not have a life outside of school. The cost of the American Dream for first-generation Americans meant not having enough money, which impacted nearly every aspect of our lives.

I hope for two things for you. First, you might not ever

shake off the feeling of wanting to spend wisely, because working hard for the American Dream makes you appreciate the value of a dollar a little bit more. Especially when you start a family of your own. But I hope you treat yourself to something great on occasion.

Secondly, your journey is and will be different from your parents'. Although the cost of the American Dream was difficult for our parents and us, we must make it better for future generations. Therefore, continue to strive just like our parents and work hard for what you want. I hope you find value in your American Dream and choose to live it your way.

Sincerely,  
Another Frugal Spender