

The Pursuit of Happiness

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Brian Palmer

Living well is a challenge. Brian Palmer, a successful businessman, lives in a comfortable San Jose suburb and works as a top-level manager in a large corporation. He is justifiably proud of his rapid rise in the corporation, but he is even prouder of the profound change he has made recently in his idea of success. "My value system," he says, "has changed a little bit as the result of a divorce and reexamining life values. Two years ago, confronted with the work load I have right now, I would stay in the office and work until midnight, come home, go to bed, get up at six, and go back in and work until midnight, until such time as it got done. Now I just kind of flip the bird and walk out. My family life is more important to me than that, and the work will wait, I have learned." A new marriage and a houseful of children have become the center of Brian's life. But such new values were won only after painful difficulties.

Now forty-one, his tall, lean body bursting with restless energy, Brian recalls a youth that included a fair amount of hell-raising, a lot of sex, and considerable devotion to making money. At twenty-four, he married. Shouldering the adult responsibilities of marriage and children became the guiding purpose of his life for the next few years.

Whether or not Brian felt his life was satisfying, he was deeply committed to succeeding at his career and family responsibilities. He held two full-time jobs to support his family, accepting apparently without complaint the loss of a youth in which, he himself reports, "the vast majority of my time from, say, the age of fifteen to twenty-two or twenty-three was devoted toward giving myself pleasure of one sort or another." Brian describes his reasons for working so hard after he married quite simply. "It seemed like the thing to do at the time," he says. "I couldn't stand not having enough money to get by on, and with my wife unable to contribute to the family income, it seemed like the thing to do.

I guess self-reliance is one of the characteristics I have pretty high up in my value system. It was second nature. I didn't even question the thing. I just went out and did it." Brian and his wife came to share very little in their marriage, except, as he thought, good sex, children, and devotion to his career. With his wife's support, he decided to "test" himself "in the Big League," and he made it, although at great cost to his marriage and family life. "What was my concept of what constituted a reasonable relationship? I guess I felt an obligation to care for materially, provide for, a wife and my children, in a style to which I'd like to see them become accustomed. Providing for my family materially was important. Sharing wasn't important. Sharing of my time wasn't important. I put in extremely long hours, probably averaging sixty to sixty-five hours a week. I'd work almost every Saturday. Always in the office by 7:30. Rarely out of the office before 6:30 at night. Sometimes I'd work until 10:30 or 11. That was *numero uno*. But I compensated for that by saying, I have this nice car, this nice house, joined the Country Club. Now you have a place you can go, sit on your butt, drink, go into the pool. I'll pay the bills and I'll do my thing at work."

For Brian's wife, the compensations apparently weren't enough. After almost fifteen years of marriage, "One day I came home. In fact, our house was for sale, and we had an offer on the house. My wife said, 'Before you accept an offer, you should probably know that once we sell this house, we will live in different houses.' That was my official notification that she was planning to divorce me."

The divorce, "one of the two or three biggest surprises of my life," led Brian to reassess his life in fundamental ways and to explore the limits of the kind of success he had been pursuing. "I live by establishing plans. I had no plan for being single, and it gave me a lot of opportunity to think, and in the course of thinking, I read for the first time in many, many years. Got back into classical music for the first time since my college years. I went out and bought my first Bach album and a stereo to play it on. Mostly the thinking process of being alone and relating to my children."

When his children chose to live with him, Brian found himself forced to shift his sense of himself and his priorities in life. "I found that being a single parent is not all that it is cracked up to be. I found it an extremely humbling experience. Whereas I go into the office in the morning and I have a personal secretary and a staff of managers and a cast of hundreds working for me, I came home and just like every Tom, Dick, and Harry in the world, I'd clean up garbage after these three big boys of mine. I'd spend two hours preparing and cleaning up after dinner, doing laundry, folding clothes, sweeping the floor, and generally doing manual labor of

the lowest form. But the fact that my boys chose to live with me was a very important thing to me. It made me feel that maybe I had been doing something right in the parenting department."

Although his wife had left him, and he later found out that she had been having an affair, Brian's period of reflection led him to rethink his role in the relationship. "Being a compulsive problem solver, I analyzed the failure. I don't like failure. I'm very competitive. I like to win. So I went back and reexamined where the thing broke down and found that I had contributed at least 50 percent and, depending on the vantage point, maybe 99 percent of the ultimate demise of the institution. Mostly it was asking myself the question of why am I behaving in such and such a way. Why am I doing this at work? Why was I doing this at home? The answer was that I was operating as if a certain value was of the utmost importance to me. Perhaps it was success. Perhaps it was fear of failure, but I was extremely success-oriented, to the point where everything would be sacrificed for the job, the career, the company. I said bullshit. That ain't the way it should be."

The revolution in Brian's thinking came from a reexamination of the true sources of joy and satisfaction in his life. And it is particularly in a marriage to a woman very different from his first wife that Brian has discovered a new sense of himself and a different understanding of what he wants out of life. He has a new sense of what love can be. "To be able to receive affection freely and give affection and to give of myself and know it is a totally reciprocal type of thing. There's just almost a psychologically buoyant feeling of being able to be so much more involved and sharing. Sharing experiences of goals, sharing of feelings, working together to solve problems, etc. My viewpoint of a true love, husband-and-wife type of relationship is one that is founded on mutual respect, admiration, affection, the ability to give and receive freely." His new wife, a divorcée his own age, brings four children to their marriage, added to Brian's own three. They have five children still living at home, and a sense of energy, mutual devotion, and commitment sufficient to make their family life a joy.

In many ways, Brian's is an individual success story. He has succeeded materially, and he has also taken hold of the opportunity to reach out beyond material success to a fuller sense of what he wants from life. Yet despite the personal triumph Brian's life represents, despite the fulfillment he seems to experience, there is still something uncertain, something poignantly unresolved about his story.

The difficulty becomes most evident when Brian tries to explain why it is that his current life is, in fact, better than his earlier life built around

single-minded devotion to his career. His description of his reasons for changing his life and of his current happiness seems to come down mainly to a shift in his notions of what would make him happy. His new goal—devotion to marriage and children—seems as arbitrary and unexamined as his earlier pursuit of material success. Both are justified as idiosyncratic preference rather than as representing a larger sense of the purpose of life. Brian sees himself as consistently pursuing a utilitarian calculus—devotion to his own self-interest—except that there has been an almost inexplicable change in his personal preferences. In describing the reasons for this change, he begins, “Well, I think I just reestablished my priorities.” He sometimes seems to reject his past life as wrong; but at other times, he seems to say he simply got bored with it. “That exclusive pursuit of success now seems to me not a good way to live. That’s not the most important thing to me. I have demonstrated to myself, to my own satisfaction, that I can achieve about what I want to achieve. So the challenge of goal realization does not contain that mystique that it held for me at one time. I just have found that I get a lot of personal reward from being involved in the lives of my children.”

American cultural traditions define personality, achievement, and the purpose of human life in ways that leave the individual suspended in glorious, but terrifying, isolation. These are limitations of our culture, of the categories and ways of thinking we have inherited, not limitations of individuals such as Brian who inhabit this culture. People frequently live out a fuller sense of purpose in life than they can justify in rational terms, as we see in Brian’s case and many others.

Brian’s restless energy, love of challenges, and appreciation of the good life are characteristic of much that is most vital in American culture. They are all qualities particularly well-suited to the hard-driving corporate world in which he works. When Brian describes how he has chosen to live, however, he keeps referring to “values” and “priorities” not justified by any wider framework of purpose or belief. What is good is what one finds rewarding. If one’s preferences change, so does the nature of the good. Even the deepest ethical virtues are justified as matters of personal preference. Indeed, the ultimate ethical rule is simply that individuals should be able to pursue whatever they find rewarding, constrained only by the requirement that they not interfere with the “value systems” of others. “I guess I feel like everybody on this planet is entitled to have a little bit of space, and things that detract from other people’s space are kind of bad,” Brian observes. “One of the things that I use to characterize life in California, one of the things that makes California such a pleasant place to live, is people by and large aren’t bothered by other people’s value systems as long as they don’t infringe upon your

own. By and large, the rule of thumb out here is that if you’ve got the money, honey, you can do your thing as long as your thing doesn’t destroy someone else’s property, or interrupt their sleep, or bother their privacy, then that’s fine. If you want to go in your house and smoke marijuana and shoot dope and get all screwed up, that’s your business, but don’t bring that out on the street, don’t expose my children to it, just do your thing. That works out kind of neat.”

In a world of potentially conflicting self-interests, no one can really say that one value system is better than another. Given such a world, Brian sets great store by one basic principle—the importance of honesty and communication. It is through communication that people have a chance to resolve their differences, since there is no larger moral ideal in terms of which conflicts can be resolved. “Communication is critical not only to a man-and-woman relationship, it is the essence of our being on this planet in my opinion. Given open communication and the ability to think problems out, most problems can be solved.” Solving conflicts becomes a matter of technical problem solving, not moral decision. Lying, which would interfere in a critical way with the ability to communicate accurately and resolve interpersonal conflicts, is thus wrong, but, even here, wrongness is largely a matter of practicality—it doesn’t pay. “The bottom line of my personal value system applies to the way I conduct business. My predecessor was characterized as a notorious, habitual, and compulsive liar, and that’s a difficult act to follow. That’s probably one of the reasons that led to his demise—that his lies were catching up with him and he left before the walls came tumbling down.”

Not lying is one of the major things Brian wants to teach his children. “Why is integrity important and lying bad? I don’t know. It just is. It’s just so basic. I don’t want to be bothered with challenging that. It’s part of me. I don’t know where it came from, but it’s very important.” Brian says “values” are important, and he stresses the importance of teaching them to his children. But apart from the injunction not to lie, he is vague about what those values are. “I guess a lot of them are Judeo-Christian ethics of modern society, that certain things are bad.” Even the things that may be “absolutely wrong,” such as killing, stealing, and lying, may just be matters of personal preference—or at least injunctions against them exist detached from any social or cultural base that could give them broader meaning.

Are there some things that are just absolutely wrong? “I don’t think I would pontificate and say that I’m in a position to establish values for humanity in general, although I’m sufficiently conceited to say that if the rest of the world would live by my value system it would be a better place,” Brian says. The justification he offers is simply, “I’m quite com-

fortable with my values." Yet values, in turn, continually slip back for Brian into a matter of personal preferences, and the only ethical problem is to make the decision that accords with one's preferences. His increased commitment to family and children rather than to material success seems strangely lacking in substantive justification. "I just find that I get more personal satisfaction from choosing course B over course A. It makes me feel better about myself. To participate in this union of chaos to try and mold something, this family situation—and maybe it's because of this bringing two families together—is a challenge. Believe me, this is a challenge. Maybe that's why it fascinates me. Maybe that's why it's important to me."

Despite the combination of tenderness and admiration he expresses for his wife, the genuine devotion he seems to feel for his children, and his own resilient self-confidence, Brian's justification of his life thus rests on a fragile foundation. Morally, his life appears much more coherent than when he was dominated by careerism, but, to hear him talk, even his deepest impulses of attachment to others are without any more solid foundation than his momentary desires. He lacks a language to explain what seem to be the real commitments that define his life, and to that extent the commitments themselves are precarious.

Joe Gorman

Joe Gorman would probably call Brian Palmer's ideas about success childish. Joe lives three thousand miles from San Jose and has never met Brian. But talking about people in his own town whose lives seem totally focussed on individual success, as Brian's once was, he says they are "trying to be kids again." For Joe, being like a kid means lacking an appreciation of one's responsibilities to one's family and one's community. It means thinking primarily about what you can get out of your family and community rather than what you should give them. For Joe, success means achieving the goals set by your family and community, not using your family and community to achieve your own individual goals.

Joe Gorman is about the same age as Brian Palmer, but unlike Brian, who has moved to many different communities in his search for personal success, Joe has always lived in the small town where his father and mother have spent most of their lives: Suffolk, Massachusetts, a community of fewer than 20,000 people, about a half-hour's drive from Boston. Suffolk was founded in 1632, and about six months before one of us interviewed Joe Gorman, the town celebrated its 250th anniversary. Joe

had taken charge of organizing the celebrations, although he had not originally been asked to do so. During the early phases of planning the anniversary festivities, the town manager appointed a committee of locally prominent townspeople that did not include Joe. But the problem was that practically none of its members had much experience in planning such a complicated event. To make matters worse, according to Joe, about half of them were more interested in getting their names in the paper than in doing much work. As a result, the first event in the long series of planned anniversary celebrations had been a fiasco—a large community dinner with only enough food for about half of the people who showed up. Joe Gorman knew that he had the ability to organize the celebrations successfully, and he felt a kind of duty to do whatever he could to help. So he got himself on the committee and became, in fact if not in name, its head.

Under Joe's direction, the anniversary celebration turned out to be a grand success. The festivities stretched out for nine months. There were parades, concerts, a carnival, athletic contests, dinners, dances, and ecumenical religious services, all well attended and smoothly organized. The fundamental meaning of the celebration was expressed for Joe in the slogan: "We are doing it together." As he put it, "That's so important—to work to get as many people as possible active." Another key theme was the importance of the family. The inspiration for many of the events came from the fact that that year had been proclaimed by the United Nations to be "the year of the family." For Joe, the highlight of the festivities was a softball tournament in which each team was made up of members of a different extended family. "We had eight clans—eight big families from Suffolk—in the tournament. In one of them some people came clear from Connecticut just to play softball on the side of their family. You know, for me the best time of the whole celebration was standing there back behind the bleachers after the softball games with members of the families that had played and talking with them about their families and drinking champagne. That to me was the ultimate. During the games between the clans, on many occasions, lots of people showed up besides the players to watch the game and see how people in the families were doing."

Another of the most inspiring events of the anniversary celebration was a day given over to the town's senior citizens. "We told people that this was their chance now to come together and see the people who had contributed to this town. They had an afternoon on the Common where they sold baked goods and made an awful lot of money." The whole series of anniversary celebrations was "so successful that the first thing that people said after it was over was, 'Why can't we have one every year?'" Accord-

ingly, the town fathers decided to have an annual celebration and made Joe Gorman the head of the committee for the next year's celebration.

In Joe's vocabulary, *success* is a very important word. But throughout our conversation with him, it was consistently applied not to any status he had gained for himself or even to any accomplishment he had realized by himself. *Success* rather applied to the experience of togetherness the community had created partially through his efforts. "We had a lot of hassles [in organizing the anniversary celebration] and a lot of complaints that we had to deal with before we got it all rolling. But when it was over, the town was totally in favor of it. And even most of those people who had been opposed to various things came up to me and said that they were totally for having it again this year. So it was a great event, a great success, and it really brought the town together. If it's successful again this year, we're going to have it year after year. It was a great success. It was great for the community. But I didn't do it. The Suffolk family did it. Yes, it's the Suffolk family, and I love being a part of it."

This is not to say that Joe does not care about receiving personal rewards for his work within the community. What he considers to be one of the greatest events of his life happened to him several months after Suffolk's anniversary celebrations were finished. He was named Good Guy of the Year in Suffolk and a huge celebration was held for him by the business and civic leaders of the town. "It was a complete surprise for me. They got me to cooperate in it by telling me that they were putting on a benefit for someone else, one of my co-workers at the factory. It was really embarrassing because I was getting after some people thinking that they weren't doing enough in preparation for this celebration for this co-worker, and then I showed up and it was for me." Joe was immensely gratified at this expression of community affection. But it was important for him that it came as a surprise—that he experienced it as a reward he had not consciously worked for.

Besides enjoying the prestige the community has "spontaneously" given him, Joe also receives an income from his efforts on behalf of the community. It is, in fact, part of his profession to be a community "good guy." He is director of public relations for one of the large manufacturing companies located in Suffolk. Like most such companies, the firm that employs Joe wants to maintain good relations with the townspeople, and to do this it contributes money to community recreation programs and other charities. It is part of Joe Gorman's job to help his company decide how best to help the town. Even though much of it happens to be part of his job, however, Joe's community service work clearly remains a labor of love. He has been offered promotions to positions in his company's head office in Houston, but he has refused them. For him,

his position in the community is more important than his status within his company. As he sees it, he works so hard for the town because he is a "natural citizen" of Suffolk. "I was born here. My father set up the athletic program at Suffolk High. Friendship alone with the people would keep me here. We will always stay here. It is my home."

Unlike Brian Palmer, therefore, Joe Gorman does not decide the proper goals that would constitute a successful life on the basis of current "priorities." The goals are given to him by the traditions of his family and community. Yet Joe's solution to the problem of discovering adequate goals in life is a solution that raises problems of its own.

The Suffolk Joe loves so much—the community of civic-minded, interlocking families rooted in two hundred fifty years of tradition—does not really exist. Three-fourths of Suffolk's present population have moved in within the past twenty-five years. Most of them are not deeply involved in the life of the town. If five hundred out of the town's nine thousand registered voters show up for a town meeting, that is considered a very good turnout. The work life of most Suffolk residents separates them from the town. Their jobs are in Boston or in one of the industrial parks surrounding that city. Even when they happen to work in Suffolk, they work in one of the factories located in the town's industrial parks—factories that are frequently parts of multinational conglomerates. They live in Suffolk because it happens to be conveniently located for them and the housing prices there happen to fit their budgets. Many of them readily admit that they really would prefer to live in one of the more affluent towns in the area, but stay in Suffolk because they could not afford a house in a wealthier community. Such people do not think of Suffolk as their "family," but only as a convenient suburb. They probably looked on the town's anniversary celebration as a set of quaint festivities—pleasant diversions for a weekend afternoon, not rituals expressing something important about the meaning of their lives.

To affirm the importance of Suffolk's traditions, Joe conjures up a fictitious golden age of the town that has been corrupted by modern developments. The spirit of this age can be recovered, he believes, and the task of recovering it can validate one's present life. "Behind what I'm doing is one of my hidden motives. I would like to see Suffolk get back to that type of atmosphere where fifteen people could get together, form a baseball team, go down to the park, don't need a uniform or anything like that, play some ball and just have a good time. Nowadays to do that sort of thing, people demand uniforms and leagues and regulations and so forth. They don't trust each other. But this other, older kind of spirit is what you need."

The spirit of spontaneous, trustful conviviality Joe remembers hav-

ing experienced as a boy has been lost, he thinks, partly because the town's newcomers have been corrupted by the atmosphere of Boston, the big city. There is dissension in local politics because "people coming from Boston are so interested in payoffs and so convinced that the politicians are corrupt." They are also concerned only about their own private investments in the town rather than the public good. "One of their concerns is that their houses were new and they wanted them to have all the proper facilities and they wanted to make sure that their investment in them was protected." But besides the corruption that comes directly from the experience of life in the city, there is also a more subtle kind of decay, spread by the modern educational system. "It's like people are trying to be kids again. It used to be that parents would discipline their kids and tell them what to do. But now in school you have all these specialists, these psychologists, who analyze the kids and say the kids need this and need that and the parents don't give the kids discipline and become like kids themselves. Kids need discipline, but instead they get these psychic jobs done on them."

The past was almost certainly never as relaxed and innocent as Joe nostalgically remembers it, however, and even if it had been, it would be totally unrealistic to try to return to the past by isolating the town from the city and eliminating the influence of modern psychology from the school curriculum. Joe's vision of the good life, seemingly rooted so firmly in the objective traditions of his community, is in the end highly subjective. Perhaps he has to hide his hopes of returning to the good old days because even he realizes that most of his fellow townspeople would find them faintly ridiculous.

Moreover, even if Joe Gorman's vision of a good society could be realized, it is not at all clear that Joe would want to live in it. "We need more family ties, more closeness as a family group," Joe says. "I grew up in a family in a neighborhood of nine houses, and all the people in those houses were relatives, cousins. The big thing for us was Labor Day weekend. At that time, all the family would get together for a huge picnic. It was wonderful." But Joe no sooner paints this nostalgic picture of family unity than he backs away from it, affirming the need to separate himself from his family. "As kids grow up, they have to go their separate ways. So now I've become more separate from my family. I think that's needed. The way I've done it, I pick my time to get together with them. But it's important that we be by ourselves, too."

And, finally, a dangerously narrow conception of social justice can result from committing oneself to small town values. For instance, just two months after the culmination of Suffolk's 250th anniversary cele-

brations, the town erupted in an angry fit of local chauvinism. The town Housing Authority had been trying to provide low-cost housing for elderly citizens. To build this housing, it needed funds from the federal government. The Department of Housing and Urban Development finally offered Suffolk a grant of \$5,000,000 to build such housing—but it stipulated that to qualify for the grant, the town also had to build a small number of low-cost housing units for poor families. Many townspeople feared that such units would be occupied by blacks and Cubans from Boston. In an intensely emotional town meeting, they rejected the HUD grant and voted to establish recall proceedings to remove the town officials who had applied for it. Townspeople appealed to the unity and integrity of their tradition-rooted community to justify segregationist policies.

Joe Gorman did not approve of the rejection of the HUD grant. There is a fundamental generosity to his character that makes him uneasy about the fear of minority groups that many townspeople feel. Yet his nostalgic desire to return to a mythical past provides little help in understanding how Suffolk might work out its contemporary problems and almost no framework for thinking about Suffolk in the context of the larger society.

Margaret Oldham

Margaret Oldham is a therapist, not unlike those Joe Gorman accuses of having undermined discipline in the family and the schools. Raised in a stable, solidly middle-class home, Margaret would nonetheless say that Joe's concept of the well-lived life is unrealistic and fails to take account of the realities of human nature and modern social life. People vary tremendously in their values and experiences, she would say, and all you do if you stick rigidly to your own standards is cut yourself off from others. Tolerance for others and a willingness to learn from new experience are important to Margaret, and their relative absence in the tightly knit, homogeneous community Joe longs to recreate would make it both claustrophobic and ultimately too undemanding for her. It would be too much like trying to stay forever in the comfort of the womb rather than coming out into the bright light of day. She places individual fulfillment higher than attachment to family and community.

Margaret, a composed woman in her early thirties, has a strong sense of discipline and has achieved an outstanding academic record and pro-

fessional success. Indeed, she feels that one of the most important things she learned from her parents was the value of hard work—"not just work, but taking pride in your work and being responsible for your work and doing it as well as you possibly can and doing a lot of it." She also attributes much of her strong sense of responsibility to her parents, who raised her "with a lot of respect for other people and their property and their rights." But she has parted company with them in one crucial sense. "I don't think it's important to be quite that moralistic, quite that rigid," she says. "I think that I accept people the way they are more than either one of my parents has ever been able to do." Her tolerance for other people makes it easier for her to get along with a variety of people than it was for her father. Her interest in other people and her capacity to accept them is critical to what makes life interesting for Margaret, particularly in her work as a therapist in a large Southern city. "I got into psychology mostly because I was just really curious about people and what made them tick. And I was interested in why people did the things they did and why they didn't have the same ideas I did. I had a lot of friends who were intelligent people who were flunking out of school and getting into a lot of trouble and I always wondered, why? What was the motivation? What was causing them to make the kinds of decisions that they made in their lives?"

Being challenged by a variety of people different from herself is a continuing source of stimulation. As a therapist she has an "eclectic background—interactionist, Gestalt, Rogersian," she explains. It is the diversity of ideas and psychological experiences that makes life in her chosen field interesting. "If you're any kind of therapist at all, you're out there on the line all the time and you learn things from all your clients and you grow a lot yourself. Doing therapy is almost as good for me as it is for my client, so I do get a lot of that sort of reward. I think just being exposed to different people's thoughts and ideas and problems and finding out, you know, what their lives are like just sort of opens up new kinds of ideas. Every time I got a client for a while, I would totally rethink my view of the world because a client would come with all these different ideas and sort of innocently challenge things that I consider to be very basic in life and I have to go home and think about it for a while."

In Margaret's view, the most important thing in life is doing whatever you choose to do as well as you can. Summing up her sense of the meaning of life, she says: "I just sort of accept the way the world is and then don't think about it a whole lot. I tend to operate on the assumption that what I want to do and what I feel like is what I should do. What I think the universe wants from me is to take my values, whatever they might happen to be, and live up to them as much as I can. If I'm the best

person I know how to be according to my lights, then something good will happen. I think in a lot of ways living that kind of life is its own reward in and of itself." Like Brian Palmer, Margaret takes "values" as given, "whatever they might happen to be."

Margaret wants to work hard at her profession, to help people, and to give and receive love in her personal relationships, including her marriage to a bright, successful engineer. But she does not think the happiness of a fulfilling life can be won without a realistic willingness to make the effort and pay the costs required. For example, you have to be willing to give to make a relationship work. What many of her clients want instead, she thinks, is an ideal relationship in which they will be loved completely without having to do anything in return. "This is the person who is going to be there to talk to, to go somewhere with them, or, you know, a person who's just going to be there and is going to understand them. Most people don't want to have to tell you how they feel. They want you to divine that. That would be perfection. Someone who would understand them so thoroughly that they would never have to say a word and just always be there for them and who would just make them feel really secure and really, oh, not alone." What people need to accept is that it is their responsibility to communicate what they need and what they feel, and to realize that they cannot expect someone else magically to make them happy. "People want to be made happy, instead of making themselves happy."

Margaret's counsel of a sober maturity fits her role. As a therapist, she cannot solve people's problems but can only help them achieve greater self-understanding so that they may deal more realistically, and perhaps more fruitfully, with life and better realize their personal preferences. She understands that human relationships require give-and-take, that you must work hard for the satisfactions you expect in life, and that you are ultimately responsible for your own life. But this clear-sighted vision of each individual's ultimate self-reliance turns out to leave very little place for interdependence and to correspond to a fairly grim view of the individual's place in the social world. Self-reliance is a virtue that implies being alone. "I do think it's important for you to take responsibility for yourself, I mean, nobody else is going to really do it. I mean people do take care of each other, people help each other, you know, when somebody's sick, and that's wonderful. In the end, you're really alone and you really have to answer to yourself, and in the end, if you don't get the job you want or, you know, meet the person you want, it's at least in part your responsibility. I mean your knight in shining armor is not going to meet you on the street and leave messages all over the world trying to find you. It's not going to happen."

Accepting personal responsibility is, then, acting like an adult, not childishly expecting other people to solve one's problems for one. But it is also simply a necessity for getting along in a world in which other people either cannot or will not help you, in which no one can make you feel "not alone," because in the end you really are alone. Margaret's image of the world sharply limits the demands she feels people can make upon one another, even in the closest, most committed relationships. Even bonds of marriage and parenthood don't overcome the isolation that is ultimately the lot of each individual: "I'm responsible for my acts and what I do." Asked whether she was responsible for others, she replied, "No." Asked whether she was responsible for her husband, she replied, "I'm not. He makes his own decisions." What about children? "I . . . I would say I have a legal responsibility for them, but in a sense I think they in turn are responsible for their acts." In relationships, as in the wider social world, "everybody likes to get their own way." So the only way to run a relationship is to strive for "fairness"—that is, "not one person making all the sacrifices or one always giving—having a relative balance between what's the giving end and getting your own way."

Since, however, there is no wider framework within which to justify common values, all one can ask from others is that they do the work of communicating their needs clearly, and one must in turn try to be clear about one's own needs and desires. If other people don't meet your needs, you have to be willing to walk out, since in the end that may well be the only way to protect your interests. The inability to make legitimate demands on others becomes an even more severe problem when one steps out of the face-to-face personal world where one may be able to negotiate differences and assure fairness through direct communication. In the world of politics, for example, the hope of cooperative effort toward common ends is necessarily disappointed: the person who thinks in terms of the common good is a "sucker" in a situation where each individual is trying to pursue his or her own interests. "Everybody wants to be on top and get their own way. It's like in a relationship. When I think about government policies, I guess I don't want them to cut off all aid to research in psychology unless they do some other things too that should be done. I mean, I don't want to be the only one who suffers. I don't want to be the only sucker. I don't want to be the fall guy for people who are not doing their part."

So while Margaret Oldham has a vision of individual fulfillment that involves deep self-knowledge, wide tolerance of differences among people, and a mature willingness to accept responsibility for one's own life, she, too, is caught in some of the contradictions her beliefs imply. She is responsible for herself, but she has no reliable way to connect her own

fulfillment to that of other people, whether they be her own husband and children or the larger social and political community of which she is inevitably a part.

Wayne Bauer

Wayne Bauer would probably agree with Margaret Oldham's insistence on the need of the individual to make a psychic break with family conventions and the limitations of tradition. Wayne is a community organizer who works in California for the Campaign for Economic Democracy. He is in his middle thirties now and considers his present outlook on life to be a product of the 1960s. "During the sixties we saw a dream, we had a vision. And we had a belief that things could be much better, on many levels," he says. "I mean, it was a time of personal growth as well as political change. And what was exciting about that is that the personal change was what would be leading into a very significant political change in the country." Personal change involved a break with one's family. "A lot of us were raised either in working-class or middle-class backgrounds and believed that there were certain things that you did with your life. The status quo. You know, what your father did. How he lived his life. You go to high school, you go to college, get married, settle down, have a family, get a respectable position in society. And I think that what we had seen in the sixties was an emptiness that we saw in our families, that this was not what we wanted for ourselves, that we wanted something better."

Wayne's break with his family and quest for "something better" came in 1965, when he was seventeen. He had joined the Marine Corps. "I had come from a background of John Wayne, you know, American patriotism. This whole kind of facade of what we were all about as the American people." After boot camp he was stationed at Camp Lejeune and would come up to New York City on leave. "Nineteen sixty-five was when NYU marched and burned the draft cards and all of a sudden there was a political awareness and these people were letting their hair grow a little longer and putting earrings in their ear. And this was a real shock to me. I mean, I didn't understand this. I was in the Marine Corps." During this time, some friends of his who had gone to college in New York began to argue with him about the Vietnam War. "And after this went on, to make a long story short, for about three or four months, I realized that my best argument held no weight. And what happened was, all of a sudden, my view of who I was and my environment was

shattered. It was like looking in the mirror and having the whole thing shattered on you and seeing all your values, all your beliefs, everything you thought was real just kind of crumble. And it left me without any values and it also left me in a position where I had this terrible feeling of loneliness that there was no one I could go to for help. All the people that I had trusted, I feel, essentially, they had lied to me."

Upon receiving orders to go to Vietnam, Wayne went AWOL, assumed an alias, spent eight years leading an underground life travelling around the country, eventually surrendered to the military in 1972, spent four months in a military stockade, but was spared a court-martial and, finally, released by the Marine Corps with a general discharge. He returned to his parents, found them totally uncomprehending of his understanding of life, and moved from New Jersey to Venice, California.

But Wayne's break with the conventions of family and community—the conventions that remain so important for people like Joe Gorman—did not end, as it did for Margaret Oldham, with a retreat into a preoccupation with profession and private life. If he knew her, Wayne would criticize Margaret Oldham for her lack of appreciation for issues of social justice. It was through radical politics that Wayne glued the shattered mirror of his life back together again. After he made his break with his past, "morality became a question to me. It's sort of like I wanted to put everything back together again with more durable material, one that would stand the strain." Political activism became that durable material. "Watching politics is watching civilization struggle and evolve, and it's very exciting, but it's also much more personal because it's your struggle to evolve into this picture, into this historic picture somehow." In the mid-seventies, Wayne was living in a Spanish-speaking neighborhood of Santa Monica and got involved with some of his neighbors in a dispute with their landlord. "I felt very much that they were being oppressed; they were being taken advantage of. These goddam landlords used immigration like a gun at their head and these people live in this constant state of fear. I had a very good feeling. I really liked these people, they were great people."

His tenant-organizing work led him into involvement with the Campaign for Economic Democracy. "I feel good about what I do. I feel that the work I'm involved in is directly affecting other people in beneficial ways. It's again this value question. You can spend all your time in seeing how many material goods you can get together and how much money you can make or you can spend it helping one another and working together. You know, we can adopt any type of system that we want, let's say it was socialism, communism, or what have you, but the system that we adopt isn't going to mean anything unless we can educate the people to

think differently and to be different. And I see what I do as sort of an educational thing in the community, that what I do when I organize tenants is to take care of an immediate crisis that they have. But really what I do is give them a sense of power about their own lives."

When they have power over their lives, each individual will have a greater sense of efficacy, the marvellous feeling of personal growth Wayne himself has felt. "They've never made their ideas public, never shared their ideas, always felt impotent, that they couldn't affect anything. I see them coming out feeling like, well, hell! we affected something. Then the next step is to show them that there are all kinds of things that they can do in society, things they can create. And all they have to do is work as a collective to do it, to agree, to be able to agree to disagree, and then come up with some kind of consensus. Oh, it's a tremendous thing. I mean, it's very beautiful to see and very exciting to be a part of because what you're seeing is kind of an evolution of consciousness."

But what specific *kinds* of things should these newly liberated people create in society? Here Wayne becomes strangely inarticulate. They will make society "better," he says. But what does he *mean* by "better"? "I'm probably not the best person to ask," he says. Even in his area of specialty, tenants' rights, he has only vague notions of what kinds of social arrangements for providing housing tenants would work out if they had the same amount of power as their landlords. "I have a right to live in this community as long as I'm not breaking the law or damaging things—and it's a very touchy question because it deals with private property and other people's rights, investment rights—but I think you can affect that, you can control that situation, that he can make a reasonable amount of money and you can live a reasonably good life—I guess. God! I'm not being very clear."

Wayne thus has a much better idea of what he is against than of what he is for. As a result, the idea of justice that provides such a powerful focus for his life's commitments is weak in substantive content. When he speaks of justice, he talks about individual rights and legal and political systems that would give everyone a fair chance of asserting them. The language he uses provides little conception of the ways in which scarce goods should be distributed in a complex society when different individuals fairly offer competing claims to those goods.* Yet he describes his own involvement in political activism as having broadened his sense of responsibility.

*The interviews with Wayne Bauer on which our discussion of him in this chapter is based were carried out in 1980. Since then his ideas about distributive justice and public policy have clarified considerably. In June 1983 he was elected to the Santa Monica Rent Control Board.

Wayne has gradually reentered the Roman Catholic Church, drawn by the example of a priest who has attempted to apply the insights of the Latin American "theology of liberation" to conditions in the United States. He has also begun seriously to consider a legal career, in which he could devote himself to public service law. In spite of these moves to give more substance and direction to his political concerns, his political vocabulary at best does a partial job of explaining and developing his own sense of justice and responsibility. As we shall see, his problem is a typical one for Americans, conservative, liberal, and radical alike.

Different Voices in a Common Tradition

Brian, Joe, Margaret, and Wayne each represent American voices familiar to us all. The arguments that we have suggested would take place among them, if they ever met, would be versions of controversies that regularly arise in public and private moral discourse in the United States. One of the reasons for these differences is that they draw from different traditions, which will be described in the next chapter. Yet beneath the sharp disagreements, there is more than a little consensus about the relationship between the individual and society, between private and public good. This is because, in spite of their differences, they all to some degree share a common moral vocabulary, which we propose to call the "first language" of American individualism in contrast to alternative "second languages," which most of us also have.

Each of the individuals that we have described in this chapter is drawn from one of the four research projects on which the book is based. We are less concerned with whether they are average than with the fact that they represent the ways in which Americans use private and public life to make sense of their lives. This is the central issue with which our book is concerned. Brian Palmer finds the chief meaning of his life in marriage and family; Margaret Oldham in therapy. Thus both of them are primarily concerned with private life. Joe Gorman gives his life coherence through his active concern for the life of his town; Wayne Bauer finds a similar coherence in his involvement in political activism. Both of them have integrated the public world deeply into their lives. Whether chiefly concerned with private or public life, all four are involved in caring for others. They are responsible and, in many ways, admirable adults. Yet when each of them uses the moral discourse they share, what we call the first language of individualism, they have difficulty articulating the richness of their

commitments. In the language they use, their lives sound more isolated and arbitrary than, as we have observed them, they actually are.

Thus all four of the persons whose voices we have heard assume that there is something arbitrary about the goals of a good life. For Brian Palmer, the goal of a good life is to achieve the priorities you have set for yourself. But how do you know that your present priorities are better than those of your past, or better than those of other people? Because you intuitively appreciate that they are right for you at the present time. For Joe Gorman, the goal of a good life is intimate involvement with the community and family into which he happens to have been born. But how do you know that in this complicated world, the inherited conventions of your community and your family are better and more important, and, therefore, more worthy of your allegiance, than those of other communities and families? In the end, you simply prefer to believe that they are better, at least for you. For Margaret Oldham, the goal of a good life is liberation from precisely the kinds of conventions that Joe Gorman holds dear. But what do you aim for once you have been liberated? Simply what you yourself decide is best for you. For Wayne Bauer, the goal of a good life is participation in the political struggle to create a more just society. But where should political struggle lead us? To a society in which all individuals, not just the wealthy, will have power over their own lives. But what are they going to *do* with that power? Whatever they individually choose to do, as long as they don't hurt anybody.

The common difficulties these four very different people face in justifying the goals of a morally good life point to a characteristic problem of people in our culture. For most of us, it is easier to think about how to get what we want than to know what exactly we should want. Thus Brian, Joe, Margaret, and Wayne are each in his or her own way confused about how to define for themselves such things as the nature of success, the meaning of freedom, and the requirements of justice. Those difficulties are in an important way created by the limitations in the common tradition of moral discourse they—and we—share. The main purpose of this book is to deepen our understanding of the resources our tradition provides—and fails to provide—for enabling us to think about the kinds of moral problems we are currently facing as Americans. We also hope to make articulate the all-too-inarticulate search of those we have described in this chapter to find a moral language that will transcend their radical individualism.

Although we have based our reflections about American traditions of moral discourse on conversations with over 200 different Americans, the major themes of our book are already contained in the four stories of life quests with which we began this chapter. Those key themes are re-

ally questions: how are we Americans to think about the nature of success, the meaning of freedom, and the requirements of justice in the modern world? Our conversations with our fellow citizens have deepened our conviction that although we have to rely on our traditions to answer those questions, we will have to probe those traditions much more critically than we are used to doing if we are going to make sense of the challenges posed by the rapidly changing world in which we live.

Success

As we noted above, Americans tend to think of the ultimate goals of a good life as matters of personal choice. The means to achieve individual choice, they tend to think, depend on economic progress. This dominant American tradition of thinking about success does not, however, help very much in relating economic success to our ultimate success as persons and our ultimate success as a society.

A century and a half ago, when most Americans still lived in small towns and worked in small businesses or on family-owned farms, the requirements of economic success were perhaps more easily reconciled with understandings of success in family and civic life. In that context, running a profitable farm or business would often have required a reputation for being a good family person and a public-spirited citizen, the meanings of which would be defined in terms of the conventions of one's local community. In Joe Gorman's story, we can see a relic of the way in which the requirements of success in one's job might have encouraged one to define the success of one's life in accordance with the conventional wisdom of one's small town.

But only a small percentage of Americans now work in small businesses in small towns. Most of us work in large public or private bureaucracies. To be a success at work means to advance up the hierarchy of such corporations by helping the corporation make a good profit. But how is this kind of success related to a more fundamental kind of success in life? Even Joe Gorman now works for a large national manufacturing corporation; and he can play such an extraordinarily active part in his community because it fits in with his job as a public relations man for his corporation. If Joe's corporation should ever decide to move its Suffolk factory away from New England to a cheaper labor market, or if the company should offer Gorman an exceptionally good promotion to work at its Houston headquarters, Joe may yet face serious difficulties reconciling the requirements of economic success with his loyalties to his home town.

Someone like Brian Palmer has, of course, already encountered such difficulties. We have seen him wrestle with the question of how to integrate his ambitions to climb the corporate ladder with his desire to have a good family life. This caused him problems, not only because the pressures of work sometimes kept him from spending adequate time with his family, but, even more subtly, because the way of thinking about success that helped him move up the corporate ladder was inappropriate for adequately comprehending the goals of a good family life. And although Brian at least recognizes the problems of integrating a successful work life with a good family life, he seems blithely unconcerned with the wider political and social implications of his work.

Throughout this book, we will be wrestling, together with Brian Palmer and many others, with this question of how to think about the relationship between economic success in our centralized, bureaucratized economy and the ultimate goals of a successful private and public life.

Freedom

Freedom is perhaps the most resonant, deeply held American value. In some ways, it defines the good in both personal and political life. Yet freedom turns out to mean being left alone by others, not having other people's values, ideas, or styles of life forced upon one, being free of arbitrary authority in work, family, and political life. What it is that one might do with that freedom is much more difficult for Americans to define. And if the entire social world is made up of individuals, each endowed with the right to be free of others' demands, it becomes hard to forge bonds of attachment to, or cooperation with, other people, since such bonds would imply obligations that necessarily impinge on one's freedom. Thus Margaret Oldham, for example, sets great store on becoming an autonomous person, responsible for her own life, and she recognizes that other people, like herself, are free to have their own values and to lead their lives the way they choose. But then, by the same token, if she doesn't like what they do or the way they live, her only right is the right to walk away. In some sense, for her, freedom to be left alone is a freedom that implies being alone.

For Margaret, as for others influenced by modern psychological ideals, to be free is not simply to be left alone by others; it is also somehow to be your own person in the sense that you have defined who you are, decided for yourself what you want out of life, free as much as possible from the demands of conformity to family, friends, or community. From this point of view, to be free psychologically is to succeed in separating oneself from

the values imposed by one's past or by conformity to one's social milieu, so that one can discover what one really wants. This was precisely the transformation Brian Palmer experienced. He came to feel that the success he had been seeking was a false goal that didn't meet his own needs, so he pushed it aside, feeling it an assertion of freedom to be able to step back from the demands of his company and fulfill his own vision of happiness. The difficulty, of course, is that this vision of freedom as freedom *from* the demands of others provides no vocabulary in which Brian, Margaret, or other Americans can easily address common conceptions of the ends of a good life or ways to coordinate cooperative action with others. Indeed, Brian points out that one thing he likes in California is the freedom people have to do what they want as long as they stay within the walls of their own houses and do not impinge on others. Implicit here, of course, is an image of self-sufficiency, as if Brian will, on his own in the context of his own small family, be able to imbue his children with "values" independently of what his neighbors are doing behind the walls of their own homes. The larger hope that his freedom might encompass an ability to share a vision of a good life or a good society with others, to debate that vision, and come to some sort of consensus, is precluded in part by the very definition of freedom Brian holds.

Joe Gorman and Wayne Bauer both value democratic as well as personal freedom. But even their more political and social definition of freedom—not freedom to be your own person so much as the freedom cherished in a democracy, freedom to speak out, to participate freely in a community, and to have one's rights respected, is highly individualistic. As a traditional American patriot, Joe Gorman deeply cherishes the American ideal of freedom, even though in many ways it is precisely the ideal of freedom that makes his dream of a united Suffolk family impossible to achieve. The success of Suffolk's family spirit depends, as he has discovered, on the willingness of a few people like himself to volunteer freely to sustain community life with their own efforts. Yet he recognizes that very few people in Suffolk are willing to undertake the burdens of shaping community life, and that a man like himself is therefore likely to become exhausted, repeatedly finding himself the only volunteer.

Even more, it is the freedom Joe Gorman values—freedom of each person to live where he wants, do what he wants, believe what he wants, and, certainly, do what he can to improve his material circumstances—that makes community ties so fragile. The freedom of free enterprise makes Suffolk a bedroom community to which the residents are attached mainly by housing prices, while economic opportunities tempt most of its native sons and daughters away. The ideal of freedom Joe Gorman holds most dear makes it difficult even to discuss the question of how a just economy or a good society might best be developed in

modern circumstances. For Joe, freedom and community can be reconciled only in the nostalgic dream of an idealized past.

* While Wayne Bauer holds what he would conceive to be social and political ideals radically different from those of Joe Gorman, he is if anything even more committed to the American ideal of freedom. He would, of course, be willing to limit the freedom of large corporations, but his guiding ideal is simply to restore what he sees as the lost freedom of everyone else. He wants to help give people back a sense that they are effective and can exercise some control over their own lives. But his passionate commitment to economic and political democracy turns out to be strangely without content. He can envision freedom from what he sees as current forms of economic exploitation, but that freedom is, for him, a virtual end in itself. The legacy of freedom is still the right of each person to feel powerful, to be free to strive after whatever he or she happens to want. Wayne's political vocabulary, despite its socialist patina, is forged from authentically American ore. He waxes passionate about how the freedom of individuals is limited by current economic and political arrangements, but he, too, has difficulty finding a way to think about what a more cooperative, just, and equal social order might look like. Like other Americans, he thinks of freedom very much as freedom *from*—from people who have economic power over you, from people who try to limit what you can do or say. This ideal of freedom has historically given Americans a respect for individuals; it has, no doubt, stimulated their initiative and creativity; it has sometimes even made them tolerant of differences in a diverse society and resistant to overt forms of political oppression. But it is an ideal of freedom that leaves Americans with a stubborn fear of acknowledging structures of power and interdependence in a technologically complex society dominated by giant corporations and an increasingly powerful state. The ideal of freedom makes Americans nostalgic for their past, but provides few resources for talking about their collective future.

Justice

Our American traditions encourage us to think of justice as a matter of equal opportunities for every individual to pursue whatever he or she understands by happiness. Equal opportunities are guaranteed by fair laws and political procedures—laws and procedures applied in the same way to everyone. But this way of thinking about justice does not in itself contain a vision of what the distribution of goods in a society would end up looking like if individuals had an equal chance to pursue their inter-

ests. Thus, there could be great disparities in the income given to people in different occupations in a just society so long as everyone had an equal chance of getting a well-paid job. But if, as is now becoming painfully apparent, there are more qualified applicants than openings for the interesting jobs, is equal opportunity enough to assure justice? What of the socially disadvantaged for whom a fair race is to no avail since they are left well short of the starting line?

Our society has tried to establish a floor below which no one will be allowed to fall, but we have not thought effectively about how to include the deprived more actively in occupational and civic life. Nor have we thought whether it is healthy for our society to give inordinate rewards to relatively few. We need to reach common understandings about distributive justice—an appropriate sharing of economic resources—which must in turn be based on conceptions of a substantively just society. Unfortunately, our available moral traditions do not give us nearly as many resources for thinking about distributive justice as about procedural justice, and even fewer for thinking about substantive justice.

Even a self-styled radical such as Wayne Bauer has a difficult time going beyond notions of procedural justice. He is outraged because in Santa Monica the political cards have been stacked against poor tenants in favor of wealthy landlords. He wants to liberate tenants from this unfair system, to give them the same opportunities as rich people to exercise their wills individually. But he becomes confused when asked what kind of society, with what kind of distribution of wealth, the tenants should try to create once they have achieved a fair chance. There is, after all, not enough land near the coast in Southern California to accommodate everyone who would want to live there. If the mechanisms of the free market are not to determine who should live in places like Santa Monica, how should that determination be made? How, in short, should scarce resources be distributed in the new social order created by liberated tenants? What would a just society really look like? To answer such questions, Wayne would have to do more than think about the fair procedures that should be created to give individuals the ability to exercise power over their own lives. He would need some sense of substantive goals, some way to think about distributive justice. But here his cultural resources fail him, as they do most of us.

We now turn to the traditions that have shaped our language and our lives for what they may tell us about our present predicament.



Culture and Character: 2 The Historical Conversation

To an American reader, the individualism that pervades the four lives described in chapter 1 may at first glance seem not to have anything to do with cultural tradition, but simply to express the way things are. Yet when we look more closely, we see that there are subtle differences among our four characters. There are different modes even within the vocabularies of each individual. Brian Palmer, for example, was at one time in his life single-mindedly devoted to career success, sacrificing everything to attainment of that goal. Later, he came to value quite different things—classical music, books, relationships, the immediate enjoyment of life—and left behind his total devotion to career. Both these modes are individualistic, but they are rooted in different traditions and have different implications. We propose to call the former mode “utilitarian individualism” and the latter “expressive individualism.” Joe Gorman and Wayne Bauer combine their individualism with somewhat different languages of civic responsibility. Margaret Oldham holds a more sharply formulated version of Brian’s individualism.

These differences derive from a historical past of which none of our characters is entirely aware. In our forward-facing society, however, we are more apt to talk about the future than the past and to imagine that the differences between us derive largely from a conflict of current interests. Yet even in the debate about our future, our cultural tradition, in its several strands, is still very much present, and our conversation would probably be more to the point if we were aware of that fact.

So long as it is vital, the cultural tradition of a people—its symbols, ideals, and ways of feeling—is always an argument about the meaning of the destiny its members share.¹ Cultures are dramatic conversations about things that matter to their participants, and American culture is no exception. From its early days, some Americans have seen the pur-

Self-Reliance

In the course of our history, the self has become ever more detached from the social and cultural contexts that embody the traditions discussed in chapter 2. As mass phenomena, the nervous search for the true self and the extravagant conclusions drawn from that search are probably relatively recent in our society.¹ But the current focus on a socially unsituated self from which all judgments are supposed to flow is a development out of aspects of American selfhood that go all the way back to the beginning. *Self-reliance* is a nineteenth-century term, popularized by Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous essay of that title, but it still comes easily to the tongues of many of those to whom we talked. Self-reliance of one sort or another is common to every one of the traditions we have discussed. What, if not self-reliant, were the Puritans, many of whom, like John Winthrop, left wealth and comfort to set out in small ships on a dangerous "errand into the wilderness"? They felt called by God, but they had to rely on themselves. Thomas Jefferson chose in his draft of the Declaration of Independence to strike a note of self-reliance when he said that emigration and settlement here "were effected at the expense of our own blood and treasure, unassisted by the wealth or the strength of Great Britain,"² conveniently forgetting how recently the British had defended the colonists against the French and Indians, but expressing a genuinely American attitude.

The note of self-reliance had a clearly collective context in the biblical and republican traditions. It was as a people that we had acted independently and self-reliantly. With utilitarian and expressive individualism, however, the collective note became muted. The focus of the self-made printer or the poet who sang of himself was more exclusively on the individual. Emerson in his 1841 essay "Self-Reliance" even declared the individual and society to be in opposition. "Society," he said, "is every-

where in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members." Emerson was speaking to the world of the independent citizen and insisting that the conformity exacted by small-town America was too coercive. His friend Thoreau would push this teaching to an extreme in his classic experiment at Walden Pond. But in his essay, Emerson also expressed a more prosaic sense of self-reliance, one that has been the common coin of moral life for millions of Americans ever since. Emerson says we only deserve the property we work for. Conversely, our primary economic obligation is only to ourselves. "Then again, do not tell me, as a good man did to-day, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor?" he wrote.³

We found self-reliance common as a general orientation in many of those to whom we spoke. Therapist Margaret Oldham typically expressed it as "taking responsibility for oneself." But economic self-reliance is often seen as the bedrock on which the more general character trait rests. Asked why he worked so hard to support his wife and child after he first got married, corporate executive Brian Palmer said, as we noted in chapter 1, "I guess self-reliance is one of the characteristics I have pretty high up in my value system." As a young husband and father, Brian felt "confronted with the stark realities of being self-supporting or dropping out of the human race."

Some critics have seen the "work ethic" in decline in the United States and a "narcissistic" concern with the self emerging in its place. In our conversations, we have found that an emphasis on hard work and self-support can go hand in hand with an isolating preoccupation with the self, as Tocqueville feared would be the case. Indeed, work continues to be critically important in the self-identity of Americans, closely linked to the demand for self-reliance. The problem is not so much the presence or absence of a "work ethic" as the meaning of work and the ways it links, or fails to link, individuals to one another.

Leaving Home

In this chapter, we seek to understand how the Americans to whom we talked understand themselves—what sense of self they have. We also want to describe their sense of a course of life, insofar as they have one. Does life indeed have a purpose or end, and, if so, what are the stages along the way?

In a culture that emphasizes the autonomy and self-reliance of the individual, the primary problems of childhood are what some psychoan-

alysts call separation and individuation—indeed, childhood is chiefly preparation for the all-important event of leaving home. Though the issues of separation, individuation, and leaving home come to a head in late adolescence, they are recurrent themes in the lives of Americans, and few if any of us ever leave them entirely behind.

Separation and individuation are issues that must be faced by all human beings, but leaving home in its American sense is not. In many peasant societies, the problem is staying home—living with one's parents until their death and worshipping parents and ancestors all one's life. In traditional Japan, the expression "leaving home" was reserved for those entering monastic life, who abandoned all ties of ordinary existence. For us, leaving home is the normal expectation, and childhood is in many ways a preparation for it.

While it sometimes appears to be a pitched battle only the heroic or rebellious wage against the parental order, more often the drive to get out in the world on your own is part of the self-conception Americans teach their children. A young therapist remembers growing up in the South as a doctor's son: "One of the messages I got as a child was to be very respectful, to have a great deal of respect for others," he says. "Another message as a child was that you were independent, you took care of yourself. The phrase that comes to mind is 'Where is your backbone?' When things are bad, you take care of yourself, you don't ask things of other people. So in one way you were real connected to other people in terms of politeness, caring, or respect. And in other ways you were very independent and would seek to be very independent."

Self-reliant and independent notions of the self show up prominently in precisely those families whose offspring report the greatest felt continuity between their parents and themselves. One of them recalls that "in my Baby Book, my mother described me as being impulsive, inquisitive, stubborn, cheerful, curious, independent, and self-sufficient. I guess I haven't changed much." They describe their coming of age in terms of breaking away from dependency on parents and relying on themselves, though in many cases, they continue to have close relations with their parents.

This development is not new in America. Sometime after the middle of the eighteenth century, according to Daniel Calhoun, child-training practices began to change from an emphasis on peace and order in the family to the development of "independent self-sufficient individuals."⁴ Interestingly enough, this had something to do with the popularization of John Locke's views on child-rearing, as contained in his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, just when his political views were becoming popular in the colonies. Politically, Locke was a stalwart oppo-

ment of patriarchy, arguing that kingship cannot be derived from fatherhood and that government is a creation of equal adults, on whose consent it necessarily depends. In his observations on child-rearing, Locke does not call for the father to abdicate his authority. Rather, he insists that the father exercise authority firmly early in the child's life with a view to the child's developing the self-discipline that will allow independence later on. By adolescence, parents are to abandon coercive authority and treat their children as self-governing friends. In this way, Locke argues, children will be able to take care of themselves in the world and good relations between parents and children can continue into the child's adulthood. For all the changes in views of child-rearing we have undergone in the past two centuries, that underlying pattern has continued.⁵

For some of the individuals we met in chapter 1, the process of leaving home was quite smooth; for others there was considerable conflict. As Hervé Varenne has pointed out, conflict does not mean that the cultural pattern of leaving home is in doubt.⁶ A degree of conflict over this issue is to some extent to be expected. However painful the process of leaving home, for parents and for children, the really frightening thing for both would be the prospect of the child never leaving home.

Of the four, Joe Gorman is the least dramatic example. In one sense, he did not leave home at all. That is what his commitment to his New England town entails. Yet in significant ways even he had to leave home. He did not follow his father's career of high school coaching but chose to go to work for a local company. He did not even choose to continue to live in the family enclave, feeling that some geographical separation, even if only in another part of the same town, was essential. Still, neighborhood and extended family continue to provide the center of this white clapboard scene. Even though their unity loosens as a new generation comes of age to start families of its own, such people remain linked by webs of friendship, work, and local economic and civic participation that span generations of the town's "natural citizens." Joe represents what may in the past have been an easier and commoner pattern to follow. One leaves home in the sense of becoming economically independent and starting a family of one's own, but one's separate life is still fundamentally similar to that of one's parents, and congenial relations with parents continue.

Margaret Oldham avoided the rebelliousness of many she saw around her and has basically fulfilled her parents' expectations of her, but for her, leaving home has involved much more extensive differences from her parents' way of life than in the case of Joe Gorman. It is worth considering her case and those of some of her colleagues because they are

illustrative of how far the upwardly mobile individual moves, geographically, culturally, and psychologically, even when fulfilling, rather than disappointing, parental expectations.

Margaret Oldham had strict parents who "knew what was right and what I should be doing." But they loved her well, and she in turn heeded the lessons they both preached and practiced about "being polite and considerate of people, respecting your parents, working and keeping things clean and neat—that was a big item—and just sort of being good and not getting into any trouble." Growing up as the younger of two children in a medium-sized city in upstate New York, Margaret went through a "lot of go-arounds" about keeping her room clean and doing her part at home. She excelled in school, and enjoyed herself on dates without getting too involved, she smiles, in "any of those nasty things young people are prone to want to do."

Margaret's country-bred mother "had a good, strong religious upbringing in the whole puritan kind of tradition," and even now she "really doesn't know how to relax except by doing something that's her job or doing things for other people." Her father "feels uncomfortable in churches, but he has a real sort of basic set of ideas" and a background much like his wife's. An extremely diligent, careful, and self-demanding worker, he took a high school diploma and his technical experience in the military into the skilled craft work of manufacturing optical equipment in a long-established business, where he has gradually taken on more and more supervisory responsibility. Asked what she learned in her family about what was important in life, Margaret answers without hesitation, "Work."

Her own hard work as a talented, serious student led Margaret to one of the state's elite public universities. There she found friends who were every bit as bright and capable as she was, typically hailing from college-educated families in the big cities and the suburbs of major metropolitan areas. Many of these friends turned out to be less single-minded about their studies and in more conflict about their lives as they came of age in the early seventies on a campus swept by politics, drugs, and cultural effervescence. While others were dropping out of school and into trouble, Margaret experimented cautiously in all of this. "I had a couple of friends that were quite self-destructive and one who is no longer with us," she says. Trying to understand what was going on among them and why they responded so differently strengthened Margaret's interest in psychology and helped her decide to pursue it in graduate school. Instead of rebelling herself, Margaret made the need to understand the rebellion of her peers a motive in her choice of career.

Margaret was a dutiful child who grew up close to her parents and

emulated them. Yet the very virtues of hard work and self-discipline she absorbed from them have led her away from their social circle into a more educated, urbane, and open-ended society. In the middle-class suburbs and cities where most of Margaret Oldham's student and therapist friends were raised, they talk of socialization rather than of tradition. Instead of authority or its breakdown, they recall their professional parents "sending them messages" to conform or achieve in line with more or less "adaptive values" in order to win their parents' love.

"Being smart, that's what the value was, being good at things, being right," remembers one of Margaret's classmates, the New York-bred daughter of a college professor and a social worker. "Ideas and books and travel—ideas more than anything—were important. I also got a lot of messages about being good and nice and doing what pleases people. My parents spent a lot of time sort of evaluating things, and so I got a real sense that things just had to be certain ways. Food had to be certain ways, and wine. Everything had to be right or else it was less pleasing." Asked why a person ought to be good by this account, the therapist replies, "Well, because people won't love you. I don't think I ever asked why, but that was the implicit message. That if you weren't smart and nice and sort of did things properly, you wouldn't be loved." How did that fit with her idea of succeeding or not succeeding? "I think it made me very ambivalent," she answers. "On the one hand, I wanted to be good and right and smart and all that. On the other hand, I think I wanted to test people to see if they would still love me if I wasn't those things."

In the eyes of these successful children of professionals without strong religious beliefs, parental love is narrowed to a reward for doing well. Moral standards give way to the aesthetic tastes and technical skills of the achievement-oriented upper middle class. "Being good" becomes a matter of being good *at things*; being right, a matter of having the right answers. Here the child is not a new edition of the parents' selves—the child Joe Gorman idealizes—but an ambivalent seeker after success and love, ready to venture far from parental patterns in search of those ends. These children need to feel that parents and the pressures they exert are not part of the real self.

Before he embarked on his search for the self he would like to be, Brian Palmer experienced much more conflict with his parents, especially his father, than Joe and Margaret did with theirs. The eldest of three children, Brian grew up in Cleveland, on the very edge of a school district populated by the affluent upper middle class. "My family did not have much money," he remembers. "I lived in a house that probably had a thousand square feet of living area. I went over and spent the night

with a friend of mine in high school whose *foyer* had a thousand square feet of living area. Big, beautiful pillared mansion up on top of the hill. I ran with those kids." To keep up with them, Brian started working hard as a teenager doing yard jobs, caddying, helping out in a shipping department, and then selling men's clothing. "I was exposed to the good life at a very young age, and I decided I wanted a piece of it," he explains. Playing \$5 and \$10 poker, he "had won and lost \$1,000 at the poker table before I was sixteen years old, but it was my money."

While he played with his friends in "rather princely fashion," Brian's family was straining to make ends meet at home. A college graduate in architecture swept up in World War II, his father was afterward unable to find a job in his chosen field and instead went into selling real estate. It gave him ulcers, little money, and less satisfaction. As soon as the children were all in school, Brian's mother went to work as a secretary to help pay the bills. Frustrated at work and often irritable at home, Brian's father early on came into conflict with his son. He "used to beat on me a whole bunch when I disobeyed the rules. Punctuality was one of his big things, and I used to be a dilly-dallier." An adolescent standoff between the two became "a parting of the ways" when Brian went off to the state university and "he gave me absolutely no help whatsoever. I earned my way or borrowed it." Caught in the middle, as always, Brian's mother "would occasionally send me a check for \$10 when I was down to my last bowl of popcorn and my last jar of peanut butter, even though I may have had twenty-four cans of beer in the refrigerator." Away at college and on his pleasurable way to "parlaying an outstanding academic record into academic probation," Brian was out on his own at last. But as the striving son failed by a father who had faltered in the world, he had effectively left home years before. Probably Brian owes more than a little of his "self-reliance" to his father's early training, but the life he has led, even more than in the case of Margaret Oldham, has taken him into realms his parents would scarcely have imagined.

Finally, in the case of Wayne Bauer, we see an example of full-scale cultural rebellion, the rejection of the "John Wayne" image of American life he had learned at home and the adoption of the life of a radical political organizer in its stead. Still, he differs only in degree from the others described above. This, too, is a way of leaving home in America. Wayne describes his youth as a transition from the middle-class American "status quo" into a world exploded by the social conflicts, movements, and alternative lifestyles of the 1960s. Traditionally, he observes, what you were to do with your life was "what your father did. How he lived his life." We have already seen, however, that for most contemporary Americans leaving home is seldom as simple as that. And, indeed, Wayne's

own early life hardly conforms to the seamless image of suburban America with which he represents his past. His parents were divorced when he was a small child, and "I never knew my father." His mother remarried, and his stepfather's frequent job transfers meant that Wayne was "always the new kid in school." In a large New Jersey high school, he made close friends with "poor people, working-class people, Catholics. And I was Protestant. My family was very WASPy. I would spend a lot of time with these friends, and my family would always tell me, 'Look, it's just as easy to make friends with people who could do something for you.' I sensed that something was wrong early in life, that the yacht club that my family belonged to and this whole social attitude really was kind of phony." Together with several of his "raunchy" friends, Wayne enlisted in the Marine Corps. But he spent his leaves in New York City with his brother's college classmates. Crawling the Village and arguing with them about Vietnam, he became convinced that the war and the military were wrong, and he deserted.

His family split by divorce, uprooted as a child by his stepfather's nationwide career moves, his youth straddling the conflicting attitudes and behavior of different social classes and crossing a cultural "generation gap," Wayne came of age along some of the dividing lines of the complex social reality that belies the suburban and small town image invoked to stand for America.

For many of those who talked to us, the family seemed to reinforce the importance of self-reliance as the cardinal virtue of individuals. The idea we have of ourselves as individuals on our own, who earn everything we get, accept no handouts or gifts, and free ourselves from our families of origin turns out, ironically enough, to be one of the things that holds us together. Like other core elements of our culture, the ideal of a self-reliant individual leaving home is nurtured within our families, passed from parent to child through ties that bind us together in solitude as well as love.⁷

Leaving Church

The self-reliant American is required not only to leave home but to "leave church" as well. This may not literally happen. One may continue to belong to the church of one's parents. But the expectation is that at some point in adolescence or early youth, one will decide on one's own that that is the church to belong to. One cannot defend one's views by

saying that they are simply the views of one's parents. On the contrary, they must be particularly and peculiarly one's own. Traditionally, Protestant piety demanded that a young person experience a unique conversion experience of his or her own, even while specifying more or less clearly the content of that experience. More recently we have come to expect even greater autonomy.

Again, though such ideas may be more widespread today, they are hardly new in America. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson is even more concerned with intellectual and religious independence than he is with economic independence. He writes, "The highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato and Milton is that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men but what they thought. A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages." Emerson assumes that his fellows accept his own confidence in the individual soul: "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string."⁸

Today religion represents a frame of reference for the self as conspicuous in its absence as in its presence. To be sure, more than nine out of ten Americans "believe in God," surveys report, and four out of ten attend church regularly.⁹ Joe Gorman, for one, still takes his family faithfully to Mass every Sunday, lingering afterward to greet his fellow-parishioners and chat with the pastor. But relatively few middle-class urbanites described themselves to us as "children of God," created in his image and likeness, bound by his commandments, and inspired by his love. Liberalized versions of biblical morality tend to subordinate themes of divine authority and human duty to the intrinsic goodness of human nature, since "God does not make junk," as a liberal pastor puts it. They also underscore the power of human choice and the possibility of self-acceptance, since "you are a child of the Universe," in the widely quoted formula one ecology activist, Cassie Cromwell, who is also a Unitarian, cited as part of her credo:

BE GENTLE WITH YOURSELF. You are a child of the Universe no less than the trees and the stars. You have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should. Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be. And whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace in your soul. With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world.

Here the self as metaphoric child echoes ecology, aestheticism, and nature mysticism, not biblical revelation. Like Margaret calling her self-fulfillment "what the universe wants from me," this formula confirms our individual rights instead of calling for our obedience to God's authority. The unfolding of the universe justifies no rational principles of conduct based on natural law, as it does for a traditional Catholic such as Joe Gorman. Instead, it reassures us of our freedom to choose our own God, our own labors, and our own ultimate ends, whatever they may be.

Following on the heels of liberalized religion's relaxed sense of duty, authority, and virtue, comes the rejection of institutional religion itself on the grounds that it is morally "hypocritical." Brian Palmer, who has now worked out his own "value system," explains why he left the Protestant church in which he was raised: "I found it absurd that someone could still profess for an hour and a half on Sunday to believe a certain set of values and then see living proof of how they lived a lie," he says. "I heard what they were saying and I listened to it. It seemed reasonable to me, and everyone else was shaking their head and saying, 'Yes' and 'Amen,' and all that. Then they walked out the door, turned around, and acted 180 degrees different. It was hypocrisy." Reasonable in themselves, the teachings of Christian morality are falsified because Christians do not actually live them out. Brian goes on to praise his wife, Maryellen, because she is that rarest of "anachronisms," a "practicing Christian." His admiration focuses on her tolerance, extended even to an abusive ex-boss. "She says that's his thing—he'll be punished by God." Brian compares this with his own attitude: "I said if I worked there I'd punch the guy out. I couldn't stand that. Seeing that kind of abuse. I want to be in control of things, and I figure God put me on earth to take care of myself and not do his work for him. I'll leave the big problems for him to solve. Little ones I'll solve for him."

As opposed to Brian's picture of Christians who fail to practice what they preach, Margaret's parents "never really preached" Christianity and churchgoing. They emphasized doing good and helping others. Her mother in particular "just sort of did it herself, sort of expecting me to come along and be part of it." Margaret's mother regularly took her to church, although her father accompanied them only at Christmas and Easter. Not until her second year in college did Margaret get out of the habit of going to church, but long before that she "had a problem with religion" related to Brian's. "I just didn't think it was fair," she objects, "that just because a person happens to be born in and grow up in China, they would never go to heaven because they never knew anything about God. Just because I was lucky enough to be born into the appropriate religion, why does that entitle me to be anybody better than a billion

Chinese who love Confucius?" Majoring in psychology in college and mulling over the sort of cultural absolutism that led Jefferson to deism, Margaret came to conclusions that suggest a diluted version of Jefferson's natural reason. For her now, God is "sort of a name that's been assigned to that particular kind of function for me, to make the most of my life." She compares this function to "the physical authority of the universe. I mean there are certain laws that *are* laws."

Throughout our history, churches have tended to follow and reinforce the dividing lines of class, status, and ethnicity. Even today, the lines of class-bound religious affiliation remain visible. As a rebellious adolescent intent on enraging his WASP Presbyterian parents, Wayne Bauer began going to an Italian Catholic church with some of his rough working-class friends from high school. For a long time after he went AWOL from the Marines, Wayne found meaning outside the church, in radical politics and an interest in art; but more recently, as we have seen, he has begun to attend a Catholic church again.

The American understanding of the autonomy of the self places the burden of one's own deepest self-definitions on one's own individual choice. For some Americans, even 150 years after Emerson wrote "Self-Reliance," tradition and a tradition-bearing community still exist. But the notion that one discovers one's deepest beliefs in, and through, tradition and community is not very congenial to Americans. Most of us imagine an autonomous self existing independently, entirely outside any tradition and community, and then perhaps choosing one.

It is harder for us to see ourselves choosing our families in the same way. We are just born into them. But even here, the work of therapy is often aimed at so distancing us from our parents that we may choose, or seem to choose, freely, which aspects of them we will resemble and which not. Leaving home in a sense involves a kind of second birth in which we give birth to ourselves. And if that is the case with respect to families, it is even more so with our ultimate defining beliefs. The irony is that here, too, just where we think we are most free, we are most coerced by the dominant beliefs of our own culture. For it is a powerful cultural fiction that we not only can, but must, make up our deepest beliefs in the isolation of our private selves.

Work

The demand to "make something of yourself" through work is one that Americans coming of age hear as often from themselves as from others.

It encompasses several different notions of work and of how it bears on who we are. In the sense of a "job," work is a way of making money and making a living. It supports a self defined by economic success, security, and all that money can buy. In the sense of a "career," work traces one's progress through life by achievement and advancement in an occupation. It yields a self defined by a broader sort of success, which takes in social standing and prestige, and by a sense of expanding power and competency that renders work itself a source of self-esteem. In the strongest sense of a "calling," work constitutes a practical ideal of activity and character that makes a person's work morally inseparable from his or her life. It subsumes the self into a community of disciplined practice and sound judgment whose activity has meaning and value in itself, not just in the output or profit that results from it.¹⁰ But the calling not only links a person to his or her fellow workers. A calling links a person to the larger community, a whole in which the calling of each is a contribution to the good of all. The Episcopal Book of Common Prayer says in the collect for Labor Day, "So guide us in the work we do, that we may do it not for the self alone, but for the common good." The calling is a crucial link between the individual and the public world. Work in the sense of the calling can never be merely private.

Though the idea of a calling is closely tied to the biblical and republican strands in our tradition, it has become harder and harder to understand as our society has become more complex and utilitarian and expressive individualism more dominant. In the mid-nineteenth-century small town, it was obvious that the work of each contributed to the good of all, that work is a moral relationship between people, not just a source of material or psychic rewards. But with the coming of large-scale industrial society, it became more difficult to see work as a contribution to the whole and easier to view it as a segmental, self-interested activity. But though the idea of calling has become attenuated and the largely private "job" and "career" have taken its place, something of the notion of calling lingers on, not necessarily opposed to, but in addition to, job and career. In a few economically marginal but symbolically significant instances, we can still see what a calling is. The ballet dancer, devoted to an ill-paid art, whose habits and practices, beautiful in themselves, are handed down in a community based on a still-living tradition, so that the lives of the public may be enriched, is an example. In any case, however we define work, it is very close to our sense of self. What we "do" often translates to what we "are."

Each of our moral traditions carries a sense of the self at work distinguished by its peculiar idea of job, career, and calling in relation to one another. The stories of Winthrop, Jefferson, Franklin, and Whitman

cannot be transposed neatly to the present, but their self-understandings and our own draw on many of the same cultural categories in facing the demand to make something of ourselves. To heed it, middle-class Americans today leave home to go to school and then to work. For some, as for Margaret Oldham, what they learn in school leads smoothly into what they do in professional work. "Sometimes it feels like I've been a student all my life," she says of her dissertation research, "and when I finally finish, I'd still like to keep a hand in research and teaching besides seeing clients." But for most of those we talked to, as for Brian, school proved less a part of what they made of themselves at work. A self-described "under-achiever" in school, Brian majored in English at a midwestern state university, but devoted much of his time to parties, playing cards, and falling in love "at the drop of a skirt." English literature and the writing of romantic poetry were, however, among the things that brought him together with his first wife. After several years at a routine white-collar job to support his wife and a child, Brian returned to school for a semester of accounting courses, then entered the management training program of a major corporation. "I went in the Resources Management Program, which is made up mostly of graduates from engineering schools, mostly the top 10 percent of the class, and I finished number one in my class through that. Then I went into the Budget Office, which is made up of the top 1 percent of that group, and I finished in the top 1 percent of that group, so I figured, O.K. I can fit in that league, and I have proven that, so now let me go out and set about making a name for myself. In 1972 I was what they call on our rank structure rank four and in 1978 I was rank fourteen. My salary had increased three times over." Literary self-expression gave way to competitive self-advancement up the rungs of training "classes" set in a corporate ladder. Mastery of a discipline, for Brian, mattered less than finishing first in the class, since learning itself was chiefly a means of making it to the top of an organization structured by chains of supervisory control and salary scales.

Compare this picture of college and corporate training with Joe Gorman's memories of his hometown high school, where "the spirit was 'Everything we do, we should do together.'" Then "the big thing was to be a member of the varsity," part of a team representing the school as a whole, rather than an individual star, seeking to stand out on his own. The latter, Joe complains, is exactly "what's happening to the country" today, from selfish Little Leaguers pushed by their parents to money-hungry major leaguers holding out on their contracts. "Instead of teaching the kid the sport, nowadays it's what he can get out of it."

Joe joined his present employers as an assembly-line worker. There

the personnel director found him—son of the local high school coach, popular athlete, and class officer now enrolled in night school classes—and promptly offered him a full-time job in the firm's front office. Here he has remained, steadily working his way up to become head public relations officer for the local plant and then turning down promotions that would take him away from Suffolk.

By contrast, the high road to corporate success has led Brian back and forth across the country, "picking up, selling the house, moving off to a strange city and strange state" every few years, making new friends and then leaving them behind again. Even now, he is conscious of the next step onward and upward: "I can probably make one more move locally. Beyond that I'd probably have to relocate geographically. Then I'd have to make a decision. Do I want the next level of challenges back East, or do I want to continue to enjoy the sunshine and lifestyle of California?"

Whatever his answer turns out to be, the forks in Brian's successful career continue to dramatize the split between public and private life—between the challenges a public self takes on and the pleasures a private self enjoys. Yet work means more to Brian than the goods it buys and the status it secures. Most of all, it defines him in terms of his "performance" in comparison with others. "I don't like failure," he asserts. "I'm very competitive. I like to win." Finishing first among his corporate peers and leapfrogging from one promotion to another have brought Brian to the work he does today. He describes it as follows: "I am called a business manager. I have profit-and-loss responsibilities for a business that will do about fifty million dollars in sales this year. I have about sixty people that report to my staff, and prior to that I was finance manager for the department I'm in now." His responsibilities as a business manager extend from sales strategies to the bottom line of profits and loss, and no further. He defines his work by his corporate position, quantified in terms of gross revenue, profit margin, staff size, and span of control.

Still rising toward the peak of a career that has defined his identity by its progress, Brian looks back on his twenties and thirties, devoted to advancing his career at the expense of tending his marriage and family life, and concedes, "I got totally swept up in my own progress, in promotions and financial successes." Yet even now, Brian's definition of success revolves around an open-ended career on the upswing, empty of a calling's sense of social responsibility. "I want to keep progressing to the point where I remain challenged," he testifies. "Where I come as close as I can to performing at the absolute limits of my capability. That's success." That is also the voice of a utilitarian self seeking its separate iden-

tity in the exercise of its own growing powers, ever freer of restraint by others and ever farther out in front of them.

Midlife, especially for middle-class American men such as Brian, often marks the "end of the dream" of a utilitarian self established by "becoming one's own man" and then "settling down" to progress in a career.¹¹ The grade grows steeper at the peak of a professional field, the ledges narrower at the top of a corporate pyramid. It becomes more difficult, or virtually impossible, to become "Number One"—sole owner-operator, chief executive officer, senior partner, or Nobel laureate. As these dreams die, the possibility fades of a self that can use work and its rewards to provide the matrix of its own transcendent identity. When the trajectory of a career flattens out, and it becomes clear that one will not, after all, make it to the top, then making it loses its meaning—as opposed to continuing in a calling and practicing law, carpentry, or scholarship as best one can, even if one cannot be the best. For many in middle age, the world of work then dims, and by extension so does the public world at large. For the fortunate among the career-weary, the private world of family and friends grows brighter, and a more expressive self comes to the fore.¹²

The alternative idea of work as a calling is conspicuously absent from Brian's pattern of success. Brian sees the value of work in terms of what it yields to a self that is separate from the actual activity work demands of him in return. In this imagery of exchange, the self stands apart from what it does, and its commitments remain calculated and contingent on the benefits they deliver. In a calling, by contrast, one gives oneself to learning and practicing activities that in turn define the self and enter into the shape of its character. Committing one's self to becoming a "good" carpenter, craftsman, doctor, scientist, or artist anchors the self within a community practicing carpentry, medicine, or art. It connects the self to those who teach, exemplify, and judge these skills. It ties us to still others whom they serve.¹³

Is the presence of a calling more evident in someone dedicated to an elite profession? Margaret Oldham, who finished at the top of her class all through college and won the chance to train as a clinical psychologist over hundreds of others, sees the personal meaning of her work from a different angle than does Brian. As we saw in chapter 1, Margaret chose psychology because of a desire to understand other people and why they were different from her. Here a self seeking to understand how we think and behave enters into a profession whose practical demands seem to strengthen personal identity. Yet academic research has turned out to be both enormously complex and artificially formalized, so that "usually by the time you get a really interesting question combed down into a research

project, it's lost a lot of this complexity and stuff that made it interesting in the first place." Even when meaning is not lost in methodology, Margaret is "plagued by the idea that nothing I'm doing research-wise is ever going to have any relevance to anybody's life." The hope of becoming a person able to help others change their lives for the better guided Margaret toward a career as a therapist. But efforts to do so have all too often proved inconclusive, and sometimes simply hopeless, especially if their recipient was not "a YAVIS—young, anxious, verbal, intelligent, and sensitive." And, she adds, even "if you've done a really good job, they don't think you've helped them at all, and they think they've done it all themselves—and in a sense they have."

By most sociological measures, Margaret's work is much more rewarding in terms of prestige and meaning than the work her parents do. Yet she asks much more *from* work and *for* herself than they do, she says, and that may be one reason she finds less "fulfillment" in work than they do. "Work is really what they do with their lives," she observes. "Working is what makes them feel worthwhile." She agrees with them that "people should work for what they get," and that "once you get into doing it, it kind of becomes an end in itself as well as a means to get your money or whatever it is that you want." But she does not fully share her parents' conviction that work is simply good and "what we're supposed to do." Nor does she always feel, as they seem to, that "work is a pleasure in itself." "I'm not as convinced of the all-importance of working as they are," she concludes. "It's important for me to do nothing sometimes, to relax," and so the big shift in her life is "doing more things for myself, taking more time for myself than I think that either one of my parents take for themselves. So to that extent I have succumbed to the 'me decade,'" she jokes, secure in the knowledge that compared to her peers the extent is minimal.

Compared to representative figures of our biblical and republican past, however, Margaret is less than fully committed to her calling. She has not given up her dreams of clarifying the mind and making the world a better place, but she now wonders at times if psychology is "really the most fulfilling place for me to be." She looks back wistfully to the tangible creativity, discipline, and sense of completion she found in the pottery and craftwork she did as a student. Doing therapy does give her a sense of fulfillment: "Just the opportunity to get close to people in the way that you do in therapy is real nice and you grow a lot. You get better and better at sharing your emotions and giving to other people." But asked how therapy contributes to the larger social world or community, Margaret shakes her head and smiles ruefully, "The only community I ever think I'm adding to is the one of people who have been in

therapy and talk like psychologists, you know, and that's not particularly positive."

For employed Americans, work offers not only the basis of a decent material life but a great deal of self-esteem. Unemployment is peculiarly painful for those to whom what one does is what one is. Yet even for quite successful Americans, such as Brian Palmer and Margaret Oldham, work as job or career does not seem to be enough. To identify wholly with work in that sense is suffocating, even if the higher rewards are not limited by narrowing opportunities in the upper echelons. The absence of a sense of calling means an absence of a sense of moral meaning. When they do not find it in their work, people like Brian and Margaret seek for such meaning, as we might expect, in some form of expressive individualism, to be pursued with the like-minded and loved ones. But the ties one forms in the search for meaning through expressive individualism are not those of the moral community of the calling. They are rather the ties of what we might call the lifestyle enclave.

The Lifestyle Enclave

At some point in midlife, many Americans turn toward sharing with others in intimacy instead of striving to outrace them. Thus, nearing forty, Brian discovered in the wake of an abrupt divorce that "I didn't like being alone. I like to be with someone." During an interregnum of single-parenting and evenings spent alone with music and books, he realized that "self-reliance is very important to me, but I am not an island, and I'm not satisfied as a human being as a single entity." A second marriage of "sharing, openness, and communication" with a "creative, challenging, totally self-reliant" woman ensued, as if according to the script of a well-resolved "midlife crisis." According to Gail Sheehy's enormously popular book *Passages*, midlife is the time to move "out of roles and into the self" in order to discover "an enlarged capacity to love ourselves and embrace others."¹⁴

Once epitomized by youthful romance, the expressive self is now supposed to revive in midlife and ripen in retirement. And, it seems, for increasing numbers of Americans, the sooner the process begins, the better. By the end of 1981, 57.1 percent of all male retirees had gone on Social Security pensions before they were sixty-five, and 60 percent of all retirements were voluntary.

The very possibility of retirement on a mass scale is a recent one, sponsored by the social insurance systems of the modern welfare state and built on the broad back of a national industrial economy. A keen

observer of life in a flourishing "retirement community" reports how few of the men there seemed to regret leaving their jobs. They took pride in their career success as executives, civil servants, school teachers, and small businessmen. Yet they retired as soon as they could afford to because they were "sick of working," hated "the pressure," had "paid their dues," wanted "to get out of the rat race"—and, finally, because they "never thought their work was socially necessary." Their work "seemed only a means of achieving a satisfactory private life—a 'life style,' as some put it," concludes Frances FitzGerald. They "had had jobs, but they had no work in the sense of lifelong interests," or a calling. Yet what leisurely pursuits do these freedom- and privacy-loving individuals most enjoy? Golf and bridge, games for sociable problem solvers who love rules as much as competition, who want "security within a fixed social order" as neatly laid out and tended as the harmonious landscape of a golf course.¹⁵

The term "lifestyle," which Frances FitzGerald heard in Sun City Center, Florida, turned up frequently in our interviews. It is worth pondering its meaning. FitzGerald is certainly right in seeing it as an expression of private life. It is linked most closely to leisure and consumption and is usually unrelated to the world of work. It brings together those who are socially, economically, or culturally similar, and one of its chief aims is the enjoyment of being with those who "share one's lifestyle."

Though the term "community" is widely and loosely used by Americans, and often in connection with lifestyle, we would like to reserve it for a more specific meaning. Whereas a community attempts to be an inclusive whole, celebrating the interdependence of public and private life and of the different callings of all, lifestyle is fundamentally segmental and celebrates the narcissism of similarity. It usually explicitly involves a contrast with others who "do not share one's lifestyle." For this reason, we speak not of lifestyle communities, though they are often called such in contemporary usage, but of lifestyle enclaves. Such enclaves are segmental in two senses. They involve only a segment of each individual, for they concern only private life, especially leisure and consumption. And they are segmental socially in that they include only those with a common lifestyle. The different, those with other lifestyles, are not necessarily despised. They may be willingly tolerated. But they are irrelevant or even invisible in terms of one's own lifestyle enclave.

The lifestyle enclave is in important respects an outgrowth of the sectoral organization of American life described in chapter 2 as resulting from the emergence of industrialization and the national market. For a long time, private life and its leisure and consumption patterns were expressions of social status, in turn linked to social class, as in more

traditional societies. But as social status and social class came to depend more and more on a national occupational system and less and less on local communities, a degree of freedom became possible in private life that would not have been conceivable in the small town or even for older urban elites. By the 1920s, a concern for lifestyle expressiveness was clearly evident in the more affluent sectors of American society, though public opinion remained ambivalent.

The massive immigration of ethnically and linguistically unfamiliar groups that accompanied the industrialization of the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries exposed Americans to cultural diversity, and so also might seem to lie behind the current phenomenon of lifestyle enclaves. While the presence of immigrant groups did accustom Americans to the presence of the culturally different, and eventually to toleration of those who remained morally irrelevant to them, ethnic groups themselves were communities or quasi-communities rather than enclaves in our sense. They attempted to reproduce the entire institutional complex of a functioning society in rural and even, as far as possible, in urban settings.

The contemporary lifestyle enclave is based on a degree of individual choice that largely frees it from traditional ethnic and religious boundaries. Among those to whom we talked, largely middle-class and similar in occupation, we found a variety of lifestyle enclaves. The newer kind of lifestyle enclave was perhaps first visible soon after World War II in what was called the "youth culture." Patterns of recreation, dress, and taste in matters such as music or food characterized young people more or less independently of ethnic or class background. These emerging youth patterns were interpreted as reactions to the "strain" of prolonged education and delayed participation in the adult world. Whether the emergence of lifestyle enclaves in midlife and among the retired can be interpreted as a reaction to the "strain" the adult occupational system places on older people is an open question. Certainly we have some evidence that that is the case. We might consider the lifestyle enclave an appropriate form of collective support in an otherwise radically individualizing society. Or, to put it somewhat differently, since the purpose of individuation has always been linked to the ability to find others who reflect and affirm one's selfhood, perhaps the lifestyle enclave is the necessary social form of private life in a society such as ours.

Although lifestyle enclaves may be most obvious in large cities, where groups of people have little in common except the way they spend their leisure time, many aspects of American life today can be viewed as incipient lifestyle enclaves. Romantic love is a quintessential form of expressive individualism. When it becomes not only the basis for the

choice of a life partner but the condition for the continuation of a marriage, it tends to make of marriage itself a lifestyle enclave. Brian Palmer's second marriage has something of that flavor. Many once genuine communities, though still referred to as communities, may be well on their way to becoming lifestyle enclaves. Joe Gorman's Suffolk, for example, has long ceased to be a community in the sense that the traditional American small town was a community. For its inhabitants, most of them recent, it is largely a residential enclave chosen as a place in which to pursue appropriate private lifestyles. In this it is no different from thousands of other American suburbs.

Wayne Bauer's Santa Monica is far from a typical suburb. His own sense of himself and of his work is very much related to an ideal of community. He sees his life as that of a full-time activist contributing to the community by organizing its members in efforts to create a more equal and just society. According to Wayne, a self defined by success on the job or in a career obscures the "truly meaningful values that will never desert" a person and "will lead to a stronger, saner world." His passion for "politics as a way of life" has crystallized the rebuilding of a once-shattered life, rescued at least a little of "what we used to dream about in the sixties," and laid the foundation for what he perceives as his lifelong calling. It does not denigrate Wayne's aspirations to point out that Santa Monica is a very special kind of place with a very high concentration of people like Wayne. Even more to the point is that Campaign for Economic Democracy activists share a lifestyle, even down to similar tastes in music, wine, and food. Thus even those who would most like to think of our society in organic communitarian forms cannot avoid the lifestyle enclave as the effective social expression of our personal lives.

To take a contrasting example, we talked to many conservative Evangelicals who have their own version of what an interdependent organic community ought to be, but who end up just as unmistakably members of lifestyle enclaves as do Wayne and his CED activist friends. This is not the whole story about either activists or Evangelicals. To the extent that their serious commitments carry them beyond private life into public endeavors, they do indeed transcend the lifestyle enclave and represent genuine community. But the tendency of contemporary American life is to pull all of us into lifestyle enclaves of one sort or another.

We should not exaggerate this tendency, however. Probably most groups in America today embody an element of community as well as an element of lifestyle enclave. The distinction is more analytic than concrete. When we hear such phrases as "the gay community" or "the Japanese-American community," we need to know a great deal before we can

decide the degree to which they are genuine communities and the degree to which they are lifestyle enclaves.

When the existence of a "youth culture" was first discovered, one of its functions was thought to be providing identity symbols for adolescents engaged in the process of separation from their families but not yet prepared to go to work as adults. Those symbols would define them, however marginally, as distinct from others, and thus as having an identity of their own. In a period when work is seldom a calling and few of us find a sense of who we are in public participation as citizens, the lifestyle enclave, fragile and shallow though it often is, fulfills that function for us all.

Grounding the Self

We have looked at various ways Americans today separate out their ideas of the self from family, religion, and work, and how they seek lifestyle enclaves to find the self-expression missing from the rest of their lives. We have also seen how their forebears left their homes, churches, and careers in order to begin again. Breaking with the past is part of our past. Leaving tradition behind runs all the way through our tradition. But how is such a separate self to be shaped and grounded? Do we have answers today that correspond to those provided by Winthrop's God, Jefferson's nature, Franklin's progress, and Whitman's poetic feeling? Almost everyone who talked with us spoke of "values" in reply. Some of them, like Joe Gorman, make no bones about what those values "really" are and should be for everyone. Those who don't know better need to be told, like children, "Shut up and listen!" Those who do know need to pitch in to stem the chaos and "cooperate with each other for the good of the community." Others, like Wayne Bauer, return repeatedly to "this value question" to emphasize that we should be "helping one another and working together" instead of seeking our own success. Margaret Oldham is more conscious of the fragile basis of her "values." "It really sort of comes down to the authority I say I give my values . . . all those sorts of goals I've set up for myself, that kind of motivate me and tell me which way to go, what to avoid."

If the self is defined by its ability to choose its own values, on what grounds are those choices themselves based? For Margaret and many others, there is simply no objectifiable criterion for choosing one value or course of action over another. One's own idiosyncratic preferences are their own justification, because they define the true self. Brian Palmer

explains his drastic shift from obsession with work to devotion to family by saying that he just got more personal satisfaction from course B than from course A. The right act is simply the one that yields the agent the most exciting challenge or the most good feeling about himself.

Now if selves are defined by their preferences, but those preferences are arbitrary, then each self constitutes its own moral universe, and there is finally no way to reconcile conflicting claims about what is good in itself. All we can do is refer to chains of consequences and ask if our actions prove useful or consistent in light of our own "value-systems." All we can appeal to in relationships with others is their self-interest, likewise enlightened, or their intuitive sympathies. In therapy, for example, Margaret would "try to get them to come to the realization that they're probably causing the other person a whole lot of pain and then ask, 'Do you think you ought to do anything about that?'" If confronted with a person whose values "I really couldn't tolerate," Margaret concludes, "I wouldn't see them in therapy." Where sympathy or already-congruent values are not enough to resolve moral disagreements between ourselves and others, we have no recourse except to withdraw from them.

In the absence of any objectifiable criteria of right and wrong, good or evil, the self and its feelings become our only moral guide. What kind of world is inhabited by this self, perpetually in progress, yet without any fixed moral end? There each individual is entitled to his or her own "bit of space" and is utterly free within its boundaries. In theory, at least, this civil and psychic right is extended to everyone, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or value system, insofar as their exercise of this right does not infringe on the right of others to do likewise.

But while everyone may be entitled to his or her own private space, only those who have enough money can, in fact, afford to purchase the private property required to do their own thing. As a consequence, economic inequalities necessarily delimit our individual "rights" to self-fulfillment—or unjustly violate those rights, as Wayne Bauer argues in his political struggle to control the free-market explosion of rents in affluent Santa Monica. The tolerance for various values and "lifestyles" so notable in Brian Palmer's suburban Silicon Valley is helped along by real estate prices (averaging well over \$100,000 per house in the early 1980s) that exclude all but the upper middle class from buying homes there. Their livelihood does not hinge on their communal loyalties or local respectability, but on their technical skills, certified by university degrees and measured by the profit-accounting of corporations such as Brian's. Brian's separate self, in short, is socially located on private property that is marked off

from the public sphere but depends entirely on the institutional structure of the society at large for its apparent freedoms.

Ted Oster, a lawyer without institutionalized religious or political commitments, who also lives in Silicon Valley, brings the world of the separate self into more extreme relief. He argues that "rigid" moral standards interfere with one's freedom and enjoyment of life, since "life is a big pinball game and you have to be able to move and adjust yourself to situations if you're going to enjoy it. You got to be able to realize that most things are not absolute. Very little is, other than life and death." If the self is to be free, it must also be fluid, moving easily from one social situation and role to another without trying to fit life into any one set of values and norms, even one's own. In fact, one's values are not really a single "system," since they vary from one social situation and relationship to the next. Life conceived as a "pinball game" has its rules, but they are all instrumental, meaningful not in themselves but only as a means to the player's enjoyment. Bending the rules makes sense if it enhances the player's satisfaction. Accordingly, with a good friend "who is dishonest with some people in a pretty fundamental way," says Ted Oster, "to enjoy him I make certain compromises in the way I look at things in order to get into him and to be able to enjoy him." "I don't think I change basically who I am. I change what I am doing, perhaps the things I say. That's another aspect of not being totally honest all the time. I won't be totally honest with somebody so that I can enjoy them a little bit more. I put some of my feelings aside. I try to adjust to their way of looking at things without changing myself."

A self free of absolute values or "rigid" moral obligations can alter its behavior to adapt to others and to various social roles. It can play all of them as a game, keeping particular social identities at arm's length, yet never changing its own "basic" identity, because that identity depends only on discovering and pursuing its own personal wants and inner impulses.

If the individual self must be its own source of moral guidance, then each individual must always know what he wants and desires or intuit what he feels. He must act so as to produce the greatest satisfaction of his wants or to express the fullest range of his impulses. The objectified moral goodness of Winthrop obeying God's will or Jefferson following nature's laws turns into the subjective goodness of getting what you want and enjoying it. Utility replaces duty; self-expression unseats authority. "Being good" becomes "feeling good." "I've always loved that thing that Mark Twain said about something moral is something you feel good after," Ted Oster remarks, "and something immoral is something you

feel bad after. Which implies that you got to try everything at least once. I guess I'm pretty result-oriented, and whatever produces a good result must be right, and whatever produces a bad result must be wrong." Acts, then, are not right or wrong in themselves, but only because of the results they produce, the good feelings they engender or express.

Given this individualistic moral framework, the self becomes a crucial site for the comparative examination and probing of feelings that result from utilitarian acts and inspire expressive ones. It is to enhance the efficiency and range of such examination that Oster suggests the need to "try everything at least once." The self must be maintained as the intuitive center of the wants and impulses that define right action, and as the unimpeachable evaluator of the good or bad feelings by which the utility of our acts can be calculated and the depth of their self-expression intuited. At first glance, this picture of the self seems commonsensically obvious and problem-free. A humanistic therapist comments, "It's not so hard for people to figure out what they want. It's just they're afraid that going and getting it is going to deprive them of other things they also want. And they're not sure how to juggle everything at once. But I think people seem to by and large have an amazingly good sense somewhere in there of what makes them feel good." Individuals can easily figure out what they want, since they intuitively know, "somewhere in there," what makes them feel good. The moral problems of a predominantly utilitarian self are simply strategic or technical problems: satisfying one want may obstruct our efforts to do likewise with another, requiring us to do some juggling.

But another difficulty arises to dim the possibility of individualistic self-knowledge. How can we be sure our own feelings and wants are uncompromised by those of others and truly independent of their values? "The evaluations of others are those internalized ideas of being good, as opposed to feeling good. And they often clash," explains the therapist. "Even though I couldn't tell you what feeling good is, and some people don't ever experience it much, I think again people know when they feel good, but they may be confused about and distracted by all those other things. It's like being in love. It's so highly subjective and experienced so differently that I can't tell you what it is. But I can tell you when I feel it." Feeling good oneself now stands in opposition to "being good," seen not as some objective state of virtue, but as conformity to the evaluations of others—doing what satisfies *them* or what defers to convention. For all its unmistakable presence and intensity on occasion, the experience of feeling good, like being in love, is so highly subjective that its distinguishing characteristics remain ineffable. The touchstone

of individualistic self-knowledge turns out to be shaky in the end, and its guide to action proves elusive.

Separated from family, religion, and calling as sources of authority, duty, and moral example, the self first seeks to work out its own form of action by autonomously pursuing happiness and satisfying its wants. But what are the wants of the self? By what measure or faculty does it identify its happiness? In the face of these questions, the predominant ethos of American individualism seems more than ever determined to press ahead with the task of letting go of all criteria other than radical private validation. Speaking of midlife, Gail Sheehy says:

Let go. Let it happen to you. Let it happen to your partner. Let the feelings. Let the changes.

You can't take everything with you when you leave on the midlife journey. You are moving away. Away from institutional claims and other people's agenda. Away from external valuations and accreditations, in search of an inner validation. You are moving out of roles and into the self. If I could give everyone a gift for the send-off on this journey, it would be a tent. A tent for tentativeness. The gift of portable roots.

To reach the clearing beyond, we must stay with the weightless journey through uncertainty. Whatever counterfeit safety we hold from overinvestments in people and institutions must be given up. The inner custodian must be unseated from the controls. No foreign power can direct our journey from now on. It is for each of us to find a course that is valid by our own reckoning.¹⁶

But to what or whom do our ethical and moral standards commit us if they are "quite independent of other people's standards and agenda"? The two traditions of individualism offer us only the cost-benefit analysis of external success and the intuition of feeling inwardly more or less free, comfortable, and authentic on which to ground our self-approval. Ideas of the self's inner expansion reveal nothing of the shape moral character should take, the limits it should respect, and the community it should serve. Ideas of potentiality (for what?) tell us nothing of which tasks and purposes are worth pursuing and are blind, for example, to the differences between a job, career, and calling. Why should we do one thing rather than another, especially when we don't happen to feel like it or don't find it profitable?

It should be clear by now that "values," a term we heard constantly from almost everyone to whom we talked, are in themselves no answer. "Values" turn out to be the incomprehensible, rationally indefensible thing that the individual chooses when he or she has thrown off the last

vestige of external influence and reached pure, contentless freedom. The ideal self in its absolute freedom is completely "unencumbered," to borrow a term from Michael Sandel.¹⁷ The improvisational self chooses values to express itself; but it is not constituted by them as from a pre-existing source. This notion of an unencumbered self is derived not only from psychotherapy, but much more fundamentally from modern philosophy, from Descartes, Locke, and Hume, who affect us more than we imagine. Locke was one of the first to discuss identity in the modern sense of the term when he said, "The identity of the same man consists, viz., in nothing but a participation of the same continued life, by constantly fleeting particles of matter, in succession vitally united to the same organized body."¹⁸

There are a number of problems with this notion of the self that have bedevilled modern thought for a long time, and the people we talked to were at least partly conscious of them. For one thing, what guarantees the autonomy of so radically empty a self against invasion from outside? Radical empiricism starts with the autonomy of the self. But, as Locke argued, what can the self be but a succession of experiences imprinted on a "blank slate"? Psychological notions of socialization and conditioning come to the same thing. Thus Margaret, who proclaims the autonomy and final aloneness of the self, nonetheless believes that "values are shaped by the way you're brought up," the "background and experiences that you've had when you were young." The extreme of this point of view, sometimes expressed in the work of Erving Goffman, is that there is no self at all.¹⁹ What seems to be a self is merely a series of social masks that change with each successive situation. An absolutely autonomous self and a self determined completely by the social situation do not, then, turn out to be opposites. Many of those to whom we talked can switch from one vocabulary to the other, hardly noticing the difference.

The language of "values" as commonly used is self-contradictory precisely because it is not a language of value, or moral choice. It presumes the existence of an absolutely empty unencumbered and improvisational self. It obscures personal reality, social reality, and particularly the moral reality that links person and society. We have therefore tried to use the term *value* sparingly in this book, except when quoting from our interviews.

In fact, many of those to whom we talked, including therapists, share our uneasiness about "values" and other current ways of thinking about the self. Even while affirming a self standing alone, apart from society and prior to it, some argue that there are "basic needs," perhaps rooted in biology, that everyone shares. Asked what is *worth* seeking in life, one therapist cites "ten basic things that people want and need: health, cloth-

ing, housing, food, sex, love and intimacy, work and mastery, playfulness, spiritual meaning, and security." Armed with this list, she can start to make natural law-like judgments of individual wants: "healthy" versus "neurotic" needs, "lower" versus "higher" developmental tasks. Yet such reasoning remains rooted in a nonsocial, noncultural conception of reality that provides remarkably little guidance beyond private life and intimate relations.

Another way out of the dead end of radical individualism, a way inherited from Wordsworth, Emerson, and other romantics, and presently found among some humanistic and transpersonal psychologists, is to assume that at the core of every person is a fundamental spiritual harmony that links him or her not only to every other person but to the cosmos as a whole. Here, too, external authority, cultural tradition, and social institutions are all eschewed. The self in all its pristine purity is affirmed. But somehow that self, once discovered, turns out to be at one with the universe. Romantic and psychologistic pantheism is, indeed, linked to one strand of our religious heritage, as we shall see later. But such romantic individualism is remarkably thin when it comes to any but the vaguest prescriptions about how to live in an actual society.

We want to make it clear that we are not saying that the people to whom we talked have empty selves. Most of them are serious, engaged, deeply involved in the world. But insofar as they are limited to a language of radical individual autonomy, as many of them are, they cannot think about themselves or others except as arbitrary centers of volition. They cannot express the fullness of being that is actually theirs.

The Meaning of the Life Course

Finding oneself means, among other things, finding the story or narrative in terms of which one's life makes sense. The life course and its major stages have become the subject of considerable social scientific research, and books on the life cycle have become best sellers. Periodizations of childhood intrigued Americans at least as long ago as the 1930s. Adolescence as a peculiarly significant stage of life, with its "identity crises," received widespread attention in the late 1950s and the 1960s. More recently, we have heard much of midlife crises and of the aging process. Given the ideal of a radically unencumbered and improvisational self that we have been describing in this chapter, it is perhaps not surprising that Americans should grasp at some scheme of life stages or crises to

give coherence to the otherwise utterly arbitrary life patterns they seem to be asked to create.

If it is to provide any richness of meaning, the idea of a life course must be set in a larger generational, historical, and, probably, religious context. Yet much popular writing about the life course (Gail Sheehy's *Passages*, for example), as well as much of the thinking of ordinary Americans, considers the life course without reference to any social or historical context, as something that occurs to isolated individuals. In this situation, every life crisis, not just that of adolescence, is a crisis of separation and individuation, but what the ever freer and more autonomous self is free for only grows more obscure. Thinking about the life course in this way may exacerbate rather than resolve the problem of the meaning of the individual life.

In most societies in world history, the meaning of one's life has derived to a large degree from one's relationship to the lives of one's parents and one's children. For highly individuated Americans, there is something anomalous about the relation between parents and children, for the biologically normal dependence of children on adults is perceived as morally abnormal. We have already seen how children must leave home, find their own way religiously and ideologically, support themselves, and find their own peer group. This process leads to a considerable amnesia about what one owes to one's parents. The owner of a car-dealership whom we talked to in Massachusetts, for example, speaks of himself as a self-made man who has always done everything for himself, conveniently forgetting that his father established the business and he himself inherited it. The tendency to forget what we have received from our parents seems, moreover, to generalize to a forgetting of what we have received from the past altogether. (We have noted Jefferson's amnesia about what the colonists owed to the British.) Conversely, many Americans are uneasy about taking responsibility for children. When asked if she was responsible for her children, Margaret Oldham said hesitatingly, "I . . . I would say I have a legal responsibility for them, but in a sense I think they in turn are responsible for their acts." Frances FitzGerald found that most of the retirees in Sun City Center had quite remote relations with their children and above all dreaded any dependency on them. Tocqueville said that Americans would come to forget their ancestors and their descendants, and for many that would seem to be the case. Such inability to think positively about family continuity makes the current widespread nostalgia for "the family" all the more poignant.

Clearly, the meaning of one's life for most Americans is to become one's own person, almost to give birth to oneself. Much of this process, as we have seen, is negative. It involves breaking free from family, com-

munity, and inherited ideas. Our culture does not give us much guidance as to how to fill the contours of this autonomous, self-responsible self, but it does point to two important areas. One of these is work, the realm, par excellence, of utilitarian individualism. Traditionally men, and today women as well, are supposed to show that in the occupational world they can stand on their own two feet and be self-supporting. The other area is the lifestyle enclave, the realm, par excellence, of expressive individualism. We are supposed to be able to find a group of sympathetic people, or at least one such person, with whom we can spend our leisure time in an atmosphere of acceptance, happiness, and love.

There is no question that many Americans find this combination of work and private lifestyle satisfying. For people who have worked hard all their lives, life in a "retirement community" composed of highly similar people doing highly similar things may be gratifying. As a woman who had lived fourteen years in Sun City Center, Florida, told Frances FitzGerald, "It's the long vacation we wished we'd always had."²⁰

On the other hand, a life composed mainly of work that lacks much intrinsic meaning and leisure devoted to golf and bridge does have limitations. It is hard to find in it the kind of story or narrative, as of a pilgrimage or quest, that many cultures have used to link private and public; present, past, and future; and the life of the individual to the life of society and the meaning of the cosmos.

We should not forget that the small town and the doctrinaire church, which did offer more coherent narratives, were often narrow and oppressive. Our present radical individualism is in part a justified reaction against communities and practices that were irrationally constricting. A return to the mores of fifty or a hundred years ago, even if it were possible, would not solve, but only exacerbate, our problems. Yet in our desperate effort to free ourselves from the constrictions of the past, we have jettisoned too much, forgotten a history that we cannot abandon.

Of course, not everyone in America or everyone to whom we talked believes in an unencumbered self arbitrarily choosing its "values," "entirely independent" of everyone else. We talked to Christians and Jews for whom the self makes sense in relation to a God who challenges, promises, and reassures. We even talked to some for whom the word *soul* has not been entirely displaced by the word *self*. We talked to those for whom the self apart from history and community makes no sense at all. To them, a self worth having only comes into existence through participation with others in the effort to create a just and loving society. But we found such people often on the defensive, struggling for the biblical and republican language that could express their aspirations, often expressing themselves in the very therapeutic rhetoric that they consciously re-

ject. It is a rhetoric that educated middle-class Americans, and, through the medium of television and other mass communications, increasingly all Americans, cannot avoid. And yet even those most trapped in the language of the isolated self ("In the end you're really alone") are troubled by the nihilism they sense there and eager to find a way of overcoming the emptiness of purely arbitrary "values."

We believe that much of the thinking about the self of educated Americans, thinking that has become almost hegemonic in our universities and much of the middle class, is based on inadequate social science, impoverished philosophy, and vacuous theology. There are truths we do not see when we adopt the language of radical individualism. We find ourselves not independently of other people and institutions but through them. We never get to the bottom of our selves on our own. We discover who we are face to face and side by side with others in work, love, and learning. All of our activity goes on in relationships, groups, associations, and communities ordered by institutional structures and interpreted by cultural patterns of meaning. Our individualism is itself one such pattern. And the positive side of our individualism, our sense of the dignity, worth, and moral autonomy of the individual, is dependent in a thousand ways on a social, cultural, and institutional context that keeps us afloat even when we cannot very well describe it. There is much in our life that we do not control, that we are not even "responsible" for, that we receive as grace or face as tragedy, things Americans habitually prefer not to think about. Finally, we are not simply ends in ourselves, either as individuals or as a society. We are parts of a larger whole that we can neither forget nor imagine in our own image without paying a high price. If we are not to have a self that hangs in the void, slowly twisting in the wind, these are issues we cannot ignore.

In this chapter, we have focussed on the quintessential American task of "finding oneself." In the course of our discussion, we have seen that however much Americans extol the autonomy and self-reliance of the individual, they do not imagine that a good life can be lived alone. Those we interviewed would almost all agree that connectedness to others in work, love, and community is essential to happiness, self-esteem, and moral worth. In succeeding chapters, we will gradually widen the circle, looking first at how we relate to very significant others, the world of love and marriage.



Love and Marriage

4

"Finding oneself" is not something one does alone. The quest for personal growth and self-fulfillment is supposed to lead one into relationships with others, and most important among them are love and marriage. But the more love and marriage are seen as sources of rich psychic satisfactions, it would seem, the less firmly they are anchored in an objective pattern of roles and social institutions. Where spontaneous interpersonal intimacy is the ideal, as is increasingly the case, formal role expectations and obligations may be viewed negatively, as likely to inhibit such intimacy.¹ If love and marriage are seen primarily in terms of psychological gratification, they may fail to fulfill their older social function of providing people with stable, committed relationships that tie them into the larger society. As we will see in this chapter, tensions between these partially conflicting conceptions of love and marriage are endemic in our society today.

Woman's Sphere

Tocqueville strongly argued the positive social functions of love and marriage. He saw the family, along with religion and democratic political participation, as one of the three spheres that would help to moderate our individualism. The family was central to his concern with "habits of the heart," for it is there that mores are first inculcated. At times he waxes extravagant on the importance of this sphere to the success of American democracy:

For my part, I have no hesitation in saying that although the American woman never leaves her domestic sphere and is in some respects very de-