CHAPTER 2

THE SUMMONED SELF

TODAY, THE AREA AROUND WASHINGTON SQUARE PARK IN LOWER MANhattan is surrounded by New York University, expensive apartments, and upscale stores. But back in 1911, there were nice brownstones on the northern side of the park and factories on its eastern and southern sides, drawing young and mostly Jewish and Italian immigrant workers. One of the nice homes was owned by Mrs. Gordon Norrie, a society matron descended from two of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence.

On March 25, Mrs. Norrie was just sitting down to tea with a group of friends when they heard a commotion outside. One of her guests, Frances Perkins, then thirty-one, was from an old but middle-class Maine family, which could also trace its lineage back to the time of the Revolution. She had attended Mount Holyoke College and was working at the Consumers' League of New York, lobbying to end child labor. Perkins spoke in the upper-crust tones befitting her upbringing—like Margaret Dumont in the old Marx Brothers movies or Mrs. Thurston Howell III—with long flat *a*'s, dropped *r*'s, and rounded vowels, "tom*aahhh*to" for "tomato."

A butler rushed in and announced that there was a fire near the square. The ladies ran out. Perkins lifted up her skirts and sprinted toward it. They had stumbled upon the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, one of the most famous fires in American history. Perkins could see the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors of the building ablaze and dozens

of workers crowding around the open windows. She joined the throng of horrified onlookers on the sidewalk below.

Some saw what they thought were bundles of fabric falling from the windows. They thought the factory owners were saving their best material. As the bundles continued to fall, the onlookers realized they were not bundles at all. They were people, hurling themselves to their death. "People had just begun to jump as we got there," Perkins would later remember. "They had been holding on until that time, standing in the windowsills, being crowded by others behind them, the fire pressing closer and closer, the smoke closer and closer.[1]

"They began to jump. The window was too crowded and they would jump and they hit the sidewalk," she recalled. "Every one of them was killed, everybody who jumped was killed. It was a horrifying spectacle."[2]

The firemen held out nets, but the weight of the bodies from that great height either yanked the nets from the firemen's hands or the bodies ripped right through. One woman grandly emptied her purse over the onlookers below and then hurled herself off.

Perkins and the others screamed up to them, "Don't jump! Help is coming." It wasn't. The flames were roasting them from behind. Forty-seven people ended up jumping. One young woman gave a speech before diving, gesticulating passionately, but no one could hear her. One young man tenderly helped a young woman onto the windowsill. Then he held her out, away from the building, like a ballet dancer, and let her drop. He did the same for a second and a third. Finally, a fourth girl stood on the windowsill; she embraced him and they shared a long kiss. Then he held her out and dropped her, too. Then he himself was in the air. As he fell, people noticed, as his pants ballooned out, that he wore smart tan shoes. One reporter wrote, "I saw his face before they covered it. You could see in it that he was a real man. He had done his best."[3]

The fire had started at about 4:40 that afternoon, when somebody on the eighth floor threw a cigarette or a match into one of the great scrapheaps of cotton left over from the tailoring process. The pile quickly burst into flames.

Somebody alerted the factory manager, Samuel Bernstein, who grabbed some nearby buckets of water and dumped them on the fire. They did little good. The cotton scraps were explosively flammable,

more so than paper, and there was roughly a ton of the stuff piled on the eighth floor alone.[4]

Bernstein dumped more buckets of water on the growing fire, but by this point they had no effect whatsoever, and the flames were spreading to the tissue paper patterns hanging above the wooden work desks. He ordered workers to drag a fire hose from a nearby stairwell. They opened the valve, but there was no pressure. As a historian of the fire, David Von Drehle, has argued, Bernstein made a fatal decision in those first three minutes. He could have spent the time fighting the fire or evacuating the nearly five hundred workers. Instead, he battled the exploding fire, to no effect. If he had spent the time evacuating, it is possible that nobody would have died that day.[5]

When Bernstein finally did take his eyes off the wall of fire, he was astonished by what he saw. Many of the women on the eighth floor were taking the time to go to the dressing room to retrieve their coats and belongings. Some were looking for their time cards so they could punch out.

Eventually, the two factory owners up on the tenth floor were alerted to the fire, which had already consumed the eighth floor and was spreading quickly to their own. One of them, Isaac Harris, gathered a group of workers and figured it was probably suicidal to try to climb down through the fire. "Girls, let us go up on the roof! Get on the roof!" he bellowed. The other owner, Max Blanck, was paralyzed by fear. He stood frozen with a look of terror on his face, holding his youngest daughter in one arm and his elder daughter's hand with the other.[6] A clerk, who was evacuating with the firm's order book, decided to throw it down and save his boss's life instead.

Most of the workers on the eighth floor were able to get out, but the workers on the ninth floor had little warning until the fire was already upon them. They ran like terrified schools of fish from one potential exit to another. There were two elevators, but they were slow and overloaded. There was no sprinkler system. There was a fire escape, but it was rickety and blocked. On normal days the workers were searched as they headed home, to prevent theft. The factory had been designed to force them through a single choke point in order to get out. Some of the doors were locked. As the fire surrounded them, the workers were left to make desperate life-and-death decisions with

limited information in a rising atmosphere of fire, smoke, and terror.

Three friends, Ida Nelson, Katie Weiner, and Fanny Lansner, were in the changing room when the screams of "Fire!" reached them. Nelson decided to sprint for one of the stairwells. Weiner went to the elevators and saw an elevator car descending the shaft. She hurled herself into space, diving onto the roof. Lansner took neither course and didn't make it out.[7]

Mary Bucelli later described her own part in the vicious scramble to get out first: "I can't tell you because I gave so many pushes and kicks. I gave and received. I was throwing them down wherever I met them," she said of her co-workers. "I was only looking for my own life. . . . At a moment like that, there is big confusion and you must understand that you cannot see anything. . . . You see a multitude of things, but you can't distinguish anything. With the confusion and the fight that you take, you can't distinguish anything."[8]

Joseph Brenman was one of the relatively few men in the factory. A crowd of women were pushing between him and the elevators. But they were small, and many of them were faint. He shoved them aside and barreled his way onto the elevator and to safety.

The fire department arrived quickly but its ladders could not reach the eighth floor. The water from its hoses could barely reach that high, just enough to give the building exterior a light dousing.

Shame

THE HORROR OF THE TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FIRE TRAUMATIZED THE CITY. People were not only furious at the factory owners, but felt some deep responsibility themselves. In 1909 a young Russian immigrant named Rose Schneiderman had led the women who worked at Triangle and other factories on a strike to address the very issues that led to the fire disaster. The picketers were harassed by company guards. The city looked on indifferently, as it did upon the lives of the poor generally. After the fire there was a collective outpouring of rage, fed by collective guilt at the way people had self-centeredly gone about their lives, callously indifferent to the conditions and suffering of the people close around them. "I can't begin to tell you how disturbed the people

were everywhere," Frances Perkins remembered. "It was as though we had all done something wrong. It shouldn't have been. We were sorry. Mea culpa! Mea culpa!"[9]

A large memorial march was held, and then a large meeting, with all the leading citizens of the city. Perkins was on stage as a representative of the Consumers' League when Rose Schneiderman electrified the crowd: "I would be a traitor to those poor burned bodies if I were to come here to talk good fellowship. We have tried you, good people of the public—and we have found you wanting!

"The old Inquisition had its rack and its thumbscrews and its instruments of torture with iron teeth. We know what these things are today: the iron teeth are our necessities, the thumbscrews are the high-powered and swift machinery close to which we must work, and the rack is here in the firetrap structures that will destroy us the minute they catch fire. . . .

"We have tried you, citizens! We are trying you now and you have a couple of dollars for the sorrowing mothers and brothers and sisters by way of a charity gift. But every time the workers come out in the only way they know to protest against conditions which are unbearable, the strong hand of the law is allowed to press down heavily upon us. . . . I can't talk fellowship to you who are gathered here. Too much blood has been spilled!"[10]

The fire and its aftershocks left a deep mark on Frances Perkins. Up until that point she had lobbied for worker rights and on behalf of the poor, but she had been on a conventional trajectory, toward a conventional marriage, perhaps, and a life of genteel good works. After the fire, what had been a career turned into a vocation. Moral indignation set her on a different course. Her own desires and her own ego became less central and the cause itself became more central to the structure of her life. The niceties of her class fell away. She became impatient with the way genteel progressives went about serving the poor. She became impatient with their prissiness, their desire to stay pure and above the fray. Perkins hardened. She threw herself into the rough and tumble of politics. She was willing to take morally hazardous action if it would prevent another catastrophe like the one that befell the women at the Triangle factory. She was willing to compromise and work with corrupt officials if it would produce results. She pinioned herself to this cause for the rest of her life.

Summoned

TODAY, COMMENCEMENT SPEAKERS TELL GRADUATES TO FOLLOW THEIR passion, to trust their feelings, to reflect and find their purpose in life. The assumption behind these clichés is that when you are figuring out how to lead your life, the most important answers are found deep inside yourself. When you are young and just setting out into adulthood, you should, by this way of thinking, sit down and take some time to discover yourself, to define what is really important to you, what your priorities are, what arouses your deepest passions. You should ask certain questions: What is the purpose of my life? What do I want from life? What are the things that I truly value, that are not done just to please or impress the people around me?

By this way of thinking, life can be organized like a business plan. First you take an inventory of your gifts and passions. Then you set goals and come up with some metrics to organize your progress toward those goals. Then you map out a strategy to achieve your purpose, which will help you distinguish those things that move you toward your goals from those things that seem urgent but are really just distractions. If you define a realistic purpose early on and execute your strategy flexibly, you will wind up leading a purposeful life. You will have achieved self-determination, of the sort captured in the oft-quoted lines from William Ernest Henley's poem "Invictus": "I am the master of my fate / I am the captain of my soul."

This is the way people tend to organize their lives in our age of individual autonomy. It's a method that begins with the self and ends with the self, that begins with self-investigation and ends in self-fulfillment. This is a life determined by a series of individual choices. But Frances Perkins found her purpose in life using a different method, one that was more common in past eras. In this method, you don't ask, What do I want from life? You ask a different set of questions: What does life want from me? What are my circumstances calling me to do?

In this scheme of things we don't create our lives; we are summoned by life. The important answers are not found inside, they are found outside. This perspective begins not within the autonomous self, but with the concrete circumstances in which you happen to be embedded. This perspective begins with an awareness that the world

existed long before you and will last long after you, and that in the brief span of your life you have been thrown by fate, by history, by chance, by evolution, or by God into a specific place with specific problems and needs. Your job is to figure certain things out: What does this environment need in order to be made whole? What is it that needs repair? What tasks are lying around waiting to be performed? As the novelist Frederick Buechner put it, "At what points do my talents and deep gladness meet the world's deep need?"

Viktor Frankl described this sort of call in his famous 1946 book *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist in Vienna who was rounded up in 1942 by the Nazis and sent to a ghetto and then to a series of concentration camps. His wife, mother, and brother died in the camps. Frankl spent most of his time in camp laying tracks for railway lines. This was not the life he had planned for himself. This was not his passion, or his dream. This is not what he would be doing if he were marching to the beat of his own drummer. But this was the life events had assigned to him. And it became clear to him that what sort of person he would wind up being depended upon what sort of inner decision he would make in response to his circumstances.

"It did not really matter what we expected from life," he wrote, "but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking the meaning of life, and instead think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly."[11] Frankl concluded that fate had put a moral task and an intellectual task before him. It had given him an assignment.

His moral task was to suffer well, to be worthy of his sufferings. He could not control how much he suffered, or whether or when he would end up in the gas chamber or as a corpse by the side of the road, but he could control his inner response to his sufferings. The Nazis tried to dehumanize and insult their victims, and some prisoners went along with this degradation or retreated into their memories of a happier past. But some prisoners struggled against the insults and fortified their own integrity. "One could make a victory of those experiences, turning life into an inner triumph," Frankl realized. One could struggle against the insults by asserting small acts of dignity, not necessarily to change your outer life or even your ultimate fate, but to strengthen the beams and pillars of your inner structure. He could exercise what

he called an "inner hold," a rigorous control of his own inner state, a disciplined defense of his own integrity.

"Suffering had become a task on which we did not want to turn our backs," Frankl wrote.[12] Once he became aware of the task events had assigned to him, he understood the meaning and ultimate purpose of his life and the opportunity the war had given him to realize that purpose. And once he understood the meaning of these events, survival itself became easier. As Nietzsche observed, "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how."

Frankl's other assignment was to take the circumstances into which he had been put and turn them into wisdom he could take to the world. Frankl had been given a great intellectual opportunity, the opportunity to study human beings under the most horrific conditions. He had the chance to share his observations with his fellow prisoners, and, if he survived, he figured he could spend the rest of his life sharing this knowledge with the world beyond.

When he had the mental energy, he spoke with groups of prisoners, telling them to take their lives seriously and struggle to preserve their inner hold. He told them to focus their minds upward on the image of a loved one, to preserve, share, and strengthen love for their absent wife or child or parent or friend, even in the midst of circumstances that conspire to destroy love, even though the loved one, having been sent to a different camp, might already be dead. Amid the grit and grime and the corpses one could still rise upward: "I called to the Lord from my narrow prison and he answered me in the freedom of space." One could, Frankl wrote, still participate in a rapturous passion for one's beloved and thus understand the full meaning of the words "The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory."

He told potential suicides that life had not stopped expecting things from them, and that something in the future was still expected of them. In the darkness after lights out, he told his fellow prisoners that someone was watching them—a friend, a wife, somebody alive or dead, or God—who did not want to be disappointed.[13] Life, he concluded, "ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets before the individual."[14]

Few people are put in circumstances that horrific and extreme, but all of us are given gifts, aptitudes, capacities, talents, and traits that we did not strictly earn. And all of us are put in circumstances that call out for action, whether they involve poverty, suffering, the needs of a family, or the opportunity to communicate some message. These circumstances give us the great chance to justify our gifts.

Your ability to discern your vocation depends on the condition of your eyes and ears, whether they are sensitive enough to understand the assignment your context is giving you. As the Jewish Mishnah puts it, "It's not your obligation to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from beginning it."

Vocation

FRANKL, LIKE PERKINS, HAD A VOCATION. A VOCATION IS NOT A CAREER. A person choosing a career looks for job opportunities and room for advancement. A person choosing a career is looking for something that will provide financial and psychological benefits. If your job or career isn't working for you, you choose a different one.

A person does not choose a vocation. A vocation is a calling. People generally feel they have no choice in the matter. Their life would be unrecognizable unless they pursued this line of activity.

Sometimes they are called by indignation. Frances Perkins witnessed the Triangle fire and was indignant that this tear in the moral fabric of the world could be permitted to last. Other people are called by an act. A woman picks up a guitar and from that moment knows that she is a guitarist. Playing is not something she does; a guitarist is who she is. Still other people are called by a Bible verse or a literary passage. One summer morning in 1896, Albert Schweitzer came upon the biblical passage "Whosoever would save his life shall lose it and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall save it." He knew at the moment he was called to give up his very successful career as a musical scholar and organist to go into medicine and become a jungle doctor.

A person with a vocation is not devoted to civil rights, or curing a disease, or writing a great novel, or running a humane company because it meets some cost-benefit analysis. Such people submit to their vocations for reasons deeper and higher than utility and they cling to

them all the more fiercely the more difficulties arise. Schweitzer would write, "Anybody who proposes to do good must not expect people to roll any stones out of his way, and must calmly accept his lot even if they roll a few more onto it. Only force that in the face of obstacles becomes stronger can win."[15]

It is important to point out how much the sense of vocation is at odds with the prevailing contemporary logic. A vocation is not about fulfilling your desires or wants, the way modern economists expect us to do. A vocation is not about the pursuit of happiness, if by "happiness" you mean being in a good mood, having pleasant experiences, or avoiding struggle and pain. Such a person becomes an instrument for the performance of the job that has been put before her. She molds herself to the task at hand. While serving as an instrument in the fight against Soviet tyranny, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn put it this way: "It makes me happier, more secure, to think that I do not have to plan and manage everything for myself, that I am only a sword made sharp to smite the unclean forces, an enchanted sword to cleave and disperse them. Grant, O Lord, that I may not break as I strike! Let me not fall from Thy hand!"

And yet people with vocations are generally not morose. In the first place, there is the joy they typically take in their own activities. Dorothy L. Sayers, best known today as a mystery writer but also a respected scholar and theologian in her time, used to make a distinction between serving the community and serving the work. People who seek to serve the community end up falsifying their work, she wrote, whether the work is writing a novel or baking bread, because they are not single-mindedly focused on the task at hand. But if you serve the work—if you perform each task to its utmost perfection—then you will experience the deep satisfaction of craftsmanship and you will end up serving the community more richly than you could have consciously planned. And one sees this in people with a vocation—a certain rapt expression, a hungry desire to perform a dance or run an organization to its utmost perfection. They feel the joy of having their values in deep harmony with their behavior. They experience a wonderful certainty of action that banishes weariness from even the hardest days.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire wasn't the only event that defined Frances Perkins's purpose in life, but it was a major one. This

horror had been put in front of her. And like many people, she found a fiercer resolve amid a flood of righteous rage. It wasn't just that so many people had died—after all, they could not be brought back to life; it was also the "ongoing assault on the common order that the fire came to symbolize." There is a universal way people should be treated, a way that respects their dignity as living creatures, and this way was being violated by their mistreatment. The person who experiences this kind of indignation has found her vocation.

The Rigorous Childhood

PERKINS WAS BORN ON BEACON HILL IN BOSTON ON APRIL 10, 1880. HER ancestors had come over in the great Protestant migration in the middle of the seventeenth century, settling first in Massachusetts and then in Maine. One ancestor, James Otis, was an incendiary Revolutionary War hero. Another, Oliver Otis Howard, served as a general in the Civil War before founding Howard University, the historically black college in Washington, D.C. Howard visited the Perkins home when Frances was fifteen. Because he had lost his arm in the war, Frances served as his scribe.[16]

The Perkinses had been farmers and brickmakers through the centuries, mostly near the Damariscotta River east of Portland, Maine. Frances's mother was a member of the large Bean family. They gave their daughter a traditional Yankee upbringing: parsimonious, earnest, and brutally honest. In the evenings, Fred Perkins read Greek poetry and recited Greek plays with friends. He began to teach Frances Greek grammar when she was seven or eight. Frances's mother was heavy, artistic, and assertive. When Frances was ten, her mother took her to a hat shop. The fashionable hats of the day were narrow and tall, with feathers and ribbons. But Susan Bean Perkins plopped a low-crowned, simple, three-cornered hat onto Frances's head. What she said next reflects a very different sort of child rearing than is common today. While today we tend to tell children how wonderful they are, in those days parents were more likely to confront children with their own limitations and weaknesses. They were more likely to confront them with an honesty that can seem brutal to us today:

"There, my dear, that is your hat," her mother said. "You should always wear a hat something like this. You have a very broad face. It's broader between the two cheekbones than it is up at the top. Your head is narrower above the temples than it is at the cheekbones. Also, it lops off very suddenly into your chin. The result is you always need to have as much width in your hat as you have width in your cheekbones. Never let yourself get a hat that is narrower than your cheekbones, because it makes you look ridiculous."[17]

These days, New England Yankee culture has been diluted by the softening influence of the global culture, but then it was still hard and distinct. Yankees were reticent, self-reliant, egalitarian, and emotionally tough. Sometimes that toughness devolved into frigidity. But sometimes it was motivated by and intermixed with a fierce love and tenderness. New Englanders tended to have an acute awareness of their own sinfulness, and they worshipped a God who demonstrated his love through restraint and correction. They worked hard. They did not complain.

One evening, Perkins, then a young woman, came downstairs wearing a new party dress. Her father told her that it made her look ladylike. Perkins reflected later, "Even if I had ever succeeded in making myself look pretty—which, mind you, I'm not saying I ever succeeded in doing—my father would never have told me. That would have been a sin."[18]

The Yankees also combined what you might call social conservatism with political liberalism. Traditional and stern in their private lives, they believed in communal compassion and government action. They believed that individuals have a collective responsibility to preserve the "good order." Even in the mid-eighteenth century, the New England colonies had levels of taxation for state and local governments that were twice as high as the levels in colonies such as Pennsylvania and Virginia. They also put tremendous faith in education. For the past 350 years, New England schools have been among the best in the United States. New Englanders have, to this day, some of the highest levels of educational attainment in the nation.[19]

Perkins's parents saw to it that she was educated, but she never earned good grades. She had a natural facility with words, and in high school she used her glibness to slide by. She then went off to Mount Holyoke College, a member of the class of 1902. The rules at the college, and at colleges generally, were, again, very different from the

rules today. Today, students live more or less unsupervised in their dorms. They are given the freedom to conduct their private lives as they see fit. Then, they were placed under restrictions, many of which seem absurd now, that were designed to inculcate deference, modesty, and respect. Here are some of the rules that formed part of the deference code when Perkins entered Holyoke: "Freshmen should keep a respectful silence in the presence of sophomores. Freshmen meeting a sophomore on the campus should bow respectfully. No Freshman shall wear a long skirt or hair high on head before the mid-year examinations."[20] Perkins survived the restraint, and the hazing that went along with this class structure, and became one of the social stars of her class, elected class president her senior year.

Today, teachers tend to look for their students' intellectual strengths, so they can cultivate them. But a century ago, professors tended to look for their students' moral weaknesses, so they could correct them. A Latin teacher, Esther Van Dieman, diagnosed Perkins's laziness, her tendency to be too easy on herself. Van Dieman used Latin grammar the way a drill instructor might use forced marches, as an ordeal to cultivate industriousness. She forced Perkins to work, hour upon hour, on precise recitations of the Latin verb tenses. Perkins would burst into tears in frustration and boredom, but later expressed appreciation for the enforced discipline: "For the first time I became conscious of character."[21]

Perkins was interested in history and literature, and she floundered badly in chemistry. Nonetheless, her chemistry teacher, Nellie Goldthwaite, hounded her into majoring in chemistry. The idea was that if she was tough enough to major in her weakest subject, she'd be tough enough to handle whatever life threw at her. Goldthwaite urged Perkins to take the hardest courses even if it meant earning mediocre grades. Perkins took the challenge. Goldthwaite became her faculty adviser. Years later, Perkins told a student with the school's alumnae quarterly, "The undergraduate mind should concentrate on the scientific courses, which temper the human spirit, harden and refine it, and make of it a tool with which one may tackle any kind of material."[22]

Mount Holyoke was the sort of school that leaves a permanent mark on its students. It did not see its role, as modern universities tend to, in purely Adam I cognitive terms. It was not there merely to teach people how to think. It was not there merely to help students question their assumptions. Instead, it successfully performed the broader role of college: helping teenagers become adults. It inculcated self-control. It helped its students discover new things to love. It took young women and ignited their moral passions by giving them a sense that humans are caught in a web of good and evil and that life is an epic struggle between these large forces. A dozen voices from across the institution told students that while those who lead flat and unremarkable lives may avoid struggle, a well-lived life involves throwing oneself into struggle, that large parts of the most worthy lives are spent upon the rack, testing moral courage and facing opposition and ridicule, and that those who pursue struggle end up being happier than those who pursue pleasure.

Then it told them that the heroes in this struggle are not the self-aggrandizing souls who chase after glory; they are rather the heroes of renunciation, those who accept some arduous calling. Then it tried to cut down their idealism and make it permanent by criticizing mere flights of compassion and self-congratulatory sacrifice. It emphasized that performing service is not something you do out of the goodness of your heart but as a debt you are repaying for the gift of life.

Then it gave them concrete ways to live this life of steady, heroic service. Over the decades, Mount Holyoke sent hundreds of women to missionary and service jobs in northwest Iran, Natal in southern Africa, and Maharashtra in western India. "Do what nobody else wants to do; go where nobody else wants to go," the school's founder, Mary Lyon, implored her students.

In 1901 a new president arrived, Mary Woolley, one of the first women to graduate from Brown and a biblical studies scholar. She wrote an essay titled "Values of College Training for Women" for *Harper's Bazaar* that captures the tone of high moral ambition that characterized life at the school. "Character is the main object for education," she declared, continuing, "A true perspective implies poise." Today, the word "poise" suggests social grace. But in that day it referred to the deeper qualities of steadiness and balance. "The lack of these qualities is often the weak place in the armor, and good impulses, high purposes, real ability, fail of their end."[23]

The Mount Holyoke education was dominated by theology and the classics—Jerusalem and Athens. The students were to take from religion an ethic of care and compassion, and from the ancient Greeks

and Romans a certain style of heroism—to be courageous and unflinching in the face of the worst the world could throw at you. In her *Harper's Bazaar* essay, Woolley quoted the Stoic philosopher Epictetus: "To live in the presence of great truths and eternal laws, to be led by permanent ideals, that is what keeps a man patient when the world ignores him and calm and unspoiled when the world praises him." Perkins and Woolley would remain friends until Woolley's death.

Perkins also went to college at a time when the social gospel movement was at its most influential. In response to urbanization and industrialization, the leaders of the movement, including Walter Rauschenbusch, rejected the individualistic and privatized religion that was prevalent in many genteel churches. It is not enough, Rauschenbusch argued, to heal the sinfulness in each individual human heart. There is also suprapersonal sin—evil institutions and social structures that breed oppression and suffering. The leaders of the social gospel movement challenged their listeners to test and purify themselves by working for social reform. The real Christian life, they said, is not a solitary life of prayer and repentance. It is a life of sacrificial service, which involves practical solidarity with the poor and membership in a larger movement working to repair God's kingdom on earth.

As class president, Perkins helped select her class motto, "Be ye steadfast." The full verse, which Perkins read to her classmates in their final prayer meeting, is from 1 Corinthians. "Therefore my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord."

Holyoke took Perkins, who had been taught, because of her sex and because of her stature, to think lowly of herself, and it persuaded her and the other women that she could do something heroic. But it achieved this task in an ironic way. It didn't tell her that she was awesome and qualified for heroism. It forced her to confront her natural weaknesses. It pushed her down. It pushed her down and then taught her to push herself upward and outward. Perkins came to Holyoke sweet and glib, diminutive and charming. She left stronger, fortified, ardent for service and clearly unsuited to the narrow bourgeois world in which she'd grown up. When Frances Perkins's mother came to see her daughter graduate from Mount Holyoke, she remarked in a tone

of dismay, "I don't recognize my daughter Fanny anymore. I can't understand it. She's a stranger to me."[24]

Tender Toughness

PERKINS KNEW SHE WANTED SOME SORT OF HEROIC LIFE, BUT SHE STRUGgled after graduation to find a specific role. She was too inexperienced to be a social worker; the agencies would not hire her. She tried teaching at an upscale school for girls in Lake Forest, Illinois, but it was uninspiring. Eventually she also commuted in to Chicago and became involved with Hull House.

Hull House was a settlement house cofounded by Jane Addams, the leading American social reformer of her day. The idea was to give women a new range of service careers, to link the affluent with the poor, and to re-create the sense of community that had been destroyed by the disruptions of industrialization. It was modeled after Toynbee Hall in London, in which affluent university men organized social gatherings with the poor in the same manner in which they would organize them with one another.

At Hull House, affluent women lived among the poor and working classes, serving as counselors, assistants, and advisers and taking on projects to make their lives better. They offered job training, child care, a savings bank, English lessons, even art classes.

Today, community service is sometimes used as a patch to cover over inarticulateness about the inner life. Not long ago, I asked the head of a prestigious prep school how her institution teaches its students about character. She answered by telling me how many hours of community service the students do. That is to say, when I asked her about something internal, she answered by talking about something external. Her assumption seemed to be that if you go off and tutor poor children, that makes you a good person yourself.

And so it goes. Many people today have deep moral and altruistic yearnings, but, lacking a moral vocabulary, they tend to convert moral questions into resource allocation questions. How can I serve the greatest number? How can I have impact? Or, worst of all: How can I use my beautiful self to help out those less fortunate than I?

The atmosphere at Hull House was quite different. The people who organized the place had a specific theory about how to build character, equally for those serving the poor and for the poor themselves. Addams, like many of her contemporaries, dedicated her life to serving the needy, while being deeply suspicious of compassion. She was suspicious of its shapelessness, the way compassionate people tended to ooze out sentiment on the poor to no practical effect. She also rejected the self-regarding taint of the emotion, which allowed the rich to feel good about themselves because they were doing community service. "Benevolence is the twin of pride," Nathaniel Hawthorne had written. Addams had no tolerance for any pose that might put the server above those being served.

As with all successful aid organizations, she wanted her workers to enjoy their work, to love their service. At the same time, she wanted them to hold their sentiments in check and to struggle relentlessly against any feelings of superiority. At Hull House, social workers were commanded to make themselves small. They were commanded to check their sympathies and exercise scientific patience as they investigated the true needs of each individual. The social worker was to be a practical adviser, almost in the manner of today's management consultant—to investigate options, offer friendship and counsel, but never let her own opinions prevail over the decisions of the beneficiaries. The idea was to let the poor determine their own lives rather than becoming dependent upon others.

Addams observed a phenomenon one still sees frequently today: Many people graduate from college energetic, lively, and impressive, but by age thirty they have become duller and more cynical versions of themselves. Their ambitions have shrunk. At school, Addams wrote in her memoir, *Twenty Years at Hull House,* students are taught to be self-sacrificial and self-forgetting, to put the good of society above the good of their ego. But when they graduate they are told to look out for themselves, to settle down into marriage and, perhaps, career. The young women are effectively asked to repress their desire to right wrongs and alleviate suffering. "The girl loses something vital out of her life to which she is entitled," Addams wrote. "She is restricted and unhappy; her elders, meanwhile, are unconscious of the situation and we have all the elements of tragedy."[25] Addams saw Hull House not only as a place to help the poor; it was a place where the affluent could

surrender to an ennobling vocation. "The final return of the deed is upon the head of the doer," Addams wrote.[26]

Perkins spent as much time at Hull House as possible, first staying over for weekends, then longer stretches. When she left, she had more of a scientific mentality—data must be gathered. She knew how to navigate the landscape of poverty. She also had more courage. Her next job was with an organization in Philadelphia founded by a Hull House alumna. Bogus employment agencies were luring immigrant women into boardinghouses, sometimes drugging them and forcing them into prostitution. Perkins exposed 111 of these places by applying for such jobs herself, confronting the pimps face-to-face. Then, in 1909, with some experience under her belt, she joined Florence Kelley in New York at the National Consumers League. Kelley was a hero and inspiration to Perkins. "Explosive, hot-tempered, determined, she was no gentle saint," Perkins would later write. "She lived and worked like a missionary, no sacrifice too great, no effort too much. She was a deeply emotional and profoundly religious woman, although the expression was often unconventional."[27] While at the Consumers' League, Perkins lobbied against child labor and other atrocities.

In New York, she also fell in with the bohemian Greenwich Village crowd: Jack Reed, who later became involved in the Russian Revolution; Sinclair Lewis, who once proposed marriage to her, at least semiseriously; and Robert Moses, who was part of the counterculture then but who would go on to become the domineering uber-engineer of New York City.

Reticence

PERKINS WAS GETTING A BIT TOUGHER AT EVERY STEP ALONG THE WAY—AT Mount Holyoke, at Hull House—and yet she was also getting more idealistic, more fervent about her cause. The Triangle Factory fire was the moment when those two processes took a definitive leap.

The United States ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, perceptively observes that some people put themselves "at stake" when they get involved in a cause. That is to say, they feel that their own reputation and their own identity are at stake when deci-

sions are made. They are active in the cause in part because of what it says about them, and they want their emotions and their identity and their pride to be validated along the way. Perkins was not "at stake" after the fire. She went to work in Albany, lobbying the state legislature for worker safety legislation. She left behind the prejudices of her upscale New York social set. She left behind the gentility of progressive politics. She would compromise ruthlessly if it meant making progress. Her mentor, Al Smith, a rising figure in New York politics, told Perkins that before long, the genteel progressives would lose interest in any cause. If you want to usher real change, he told her, you have to work with the sleazy legislators and the rough party pols. You have to be practical, subordinate your personal purity to the cause. Perkins learned that in a fallen world it is often the "tainted" people who help you do the most good. In Albany she began to work closely with the denizens of the Tammany Hall political machine, who were regarded with horror in the polite circles in which she had previously traveled.

In Albany, Perkins also learned how to deal with older men. One day she was standing by the elevators of the state capitol when a crude little senator named Hugh Frawley came out and started describing the confidential details of the backroom negotiations and moaning about the shameful work he was compelled to perform. Swept up in self-pity, he cried, "Every man's got a mother, you know."

Perkins kept a folder titled "Notes on the Male Mind" and recorded this episode in it. It played a major role in her political education: "I learned from this that the way men take women in political life is to associate them with motherhood. They know and respect their mothers—99 percent of them do. It's a primitive and primary attitude. I said to myself, 'That's the way to get things done. So behave, dress, and so comport yourself that you remind them subconsciously of their mothers.'"[28]

Perkins was then thirty-three, and perky, though certainly not beautiful. Up until then, she had dressed in the conventional fashion of the day. But from that point on she began dressing like a mother. She wore somber black dresses with white bow ties at the neck. She wore pearls and a black tricorn hat and adopted a matronly demeanor. The press picked up on the change and started calling her "Mother Perkins" for the way she led sixty-something state legislators. She

despised the nickname, but she found that the method worked. She suppressed her sexuality, her femininity, and even part of her identity in order to win the confidence of the old men around her. It's a questionable tactic today, when women should not have to suppress themselves to succeed, but in the 1920s, it was necessary.

Among other projects, Perkins lobbied furiously for a bill to limit the workweek to 54 hours. She tried to befriend the machine bosses to get them to support the bill. They did their best to deceive and outmaneuver her, but she won support from some of the rank and file. "Me sister was a poor girl and she went to work when she was young," one machine pol, Big Tim Sullivan, confided to her. "I feel kind sorry for them poor girls that work the way you say they work. I'd like to do them a good turn. I'd like to do you a good turn."[29]

When the 54-hour workweek bill finally came to a vote, the legislators exempted one of the most egregious but politically influential industries, the canners. The activists for the bill had spent the previous months insisting that there could be no exemptions. All industries, especially the canners, had to be covered by the legislation. At the crucial moment, Perkins stood at the edge of the legislative chamber. On the spot, she had to decide whether to accept this deeply flawed bill or reject it as a matter of principle. Her colleagues argued vociferously for rejecting it. Instead, she took half a loaf. She told legislators her organization would support the bill. "This is my responsibility. I'll do it and hang for it if necessary."[30] Many Progressives were indeed outraged. But her tough-minded mentor, Florence Kelley, completely endorsed her decision. Forever after Perkins was known as a "half-a-loaf girl," in public or private life, as someone who would take as much as circumstances allowed.[31]

Around this time she met Paul Wilson, a handsome, wellborn progressive, who became a close aide to New York's reformist mayor, John Purroy Mitchel. Wilson fell in love with Perkins and slowly won her over. "Before you came into my life," she wrote to him, "it was a lonesome place—cold and raw and trembling except on the outside. . . . You stormed into my heart somehow and I could never let you go."[32]

The courtship was odd. Perkins's letters to Wilson are romantic, earnest, and passionate. But with her friends and co-workers she was extremely reticent, and decades later she would deny that she had ever

felt strong emotions. They were married on September 26, 1913, at Grace Church in Lower Manhattan. They did not invite their friends or tell them of the wedding in advance. Perkins and Wilson informed their families, but too late for them to attend. Perkins dressed for the wedding alone in her apartment on Waverly Place and probably walked over. The two witnesses were just people who happened to be in the building at the time. There was no luncheon or tea afterward.

When she described her decision to marry in later years, she adopted the matter-of-fact tone that you might use for making a dental appointment. "There was a New England pride in me," Perkins said decades later. "I wasn't anxious to get married. To tell the truth, I was reluctant. I was no longer a child but a grown woman. I hadn't wanted to marry. I liked life better in a single harness."[33] But people were constantly asking her when she would find a husband, so she decided to get it out of the way, thinking, "I know Paul Wilson well. I like him. . . . I enjoy his friends and company and I might as well marry and get it off my mind."

Their first years were relatively happy. They lived in a gracious townhouse on Washington Square, not far from where Perkins had been drinking tea when the Triangle fire erupted. Wilson served in the mayor's office. Perkins continued with her social work. Their home became a center for political activists of the day.

Soon things began to deteriorate. John Mitchel was voted out of office. Wilson had an affair with a society lady, which caused a furor and then was never mentioned again. Perkins began to feel stifled in the marriage and asked for a separation. "I've made some wretched blunders," Perkins wrote to Wilson. "I've become a different kind of person with a lesser degree of working efficiency and paler kind of spiritual efficiency."[34]

Then she got pregnant. The boy died shortly after birth. Perkins was consumed by grief, but that, too, was never mentioned again. Afterward, Perkins became executive secretary of the Maternity Center Association, a voluntary organization that sought to lower maternal and infant death rates. She also had a daughter, Susanna, named after the wife of the second governor of the Plymouth Colony.

Perkins wanted to have another child, but by 1918 Wilson was showing signs of mental illness. He seems to have been manic-depressive. He couldn't withstand any pressure. "It was always up and

down. He was sometimes depressed, sometimes excited," Perkins said later. From 1918 on there were never anything but very short periods of reasonably comfortable accommodations to life. In one of these manic phases, Wilson invested his life's savings in a gold scheme and was wiped out. Perkins was sometimes afraid to be alone with him, because he was prone to violent rages and was much stronger than she was. He would spend significant parts of the next several decades in asylums and institutional care, where Perkins would visit him on weekends. When he was home he was unable to handle any responsibility. He had a nurse—euphemistically known as a secretary—to look after him. "He was becoming a kind of nonperson," Perkins's biographer, George Martin, wrote, "someone to be talked at rather than with."[35]

Her New England reticence kicked in. She called the loss of their family fortune "this accident," and she realized she would have to work to support the family. She pushed such "accidents" "into the background. I haven't brooded over them and had a Freudian collapse."[36] For the next several decades she tried to rope off her private life, conceal it from public view. This attitude was partly a product of her Yankee upbringing. But she was also reticent as a matter of philosophy and conviction. She believed that private emotions were too intricate to be exposed to public glare; she would have been horrified by the culture of exposure that is so prevalent today.

There is a general struggle between two philosophic dispositions, what the social critic Rochelle Gurstein calls the party of reticence and the party of exposure. The party of reticence believes that the tender emotions of the inner world are brutalized and polluted when they are exposed to the glare of public exhibition. The party of exposure believes that anything secret is suspect and that life works better when everything is brought out into the open and discussed. Perkins was definitely a member of the party of reticence. She stood with those who believe that everything that is complex, nuanced, contradictory, paradoxical, and mysterious about private sensations is reduced to banality when it is paraded about and summarized in pat phrases. Damage is done when people bring intimate things before mere acquaintances or total strangers. Precious emotions are lifted out of the context of trust and intimacy and trampled. Therefore people should keep what is private, private. Though she was a believer in

government when it came to serving the poor and protecting the weak, she had a strong aversion to government when it trampled the right to privacy.

There was a cost to this philosophy. She was not superbly introspective. She did not excel at intimacy. She did not have a particularly happy private life. It is hard to know what would have happened if her husband had not spent so much time in mental institutions, but it is likely that her public vocation would have crowded out her energy and capacity for private intimacy nonetheless. She was built for the public campaign. She did not receive love well, or give it, or display vulnerability. Even her care for her daughter often took the form of a moral improvement crusade, which backfired. Frances exerted iron control over herself and expected it in her daughter.

But that daughter, Susanna, inherited her father's manic temperament. Starting when she was sixteen, when Perkins moved to Washington to serve in the Roosevelt administration, they seldom shared a home. Throughout her life, Susanna suffered severe bouts of depression. Susanna married a man who conducted a flagrant affair. By the 1940s, she was something of a hippie, twenty years before the term existed. She became involved with various countercultural groups. She developed a fixation on the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi. She went out of her way to shock polite society and embarrass her mother. Perkins once invited Susanna to a society event and begged her to dress appropriately. Susanna chose a flamboyant green dress and wore her hair piled wildly atop her head, with garish flowers adorning her hair and neck.

"I have given way to morbid superstition that I am the cause of others' nervous collapse, my husband, my daughter," Perkins confessed. "[It] frightens and oppresses me."[37] Susanna was never really able to work and was supported by Frances. Even at age seventy-seven, Frances turned over her rent-controlled apartment in New York so that Susanna would have a place to live. She had to take a job to pay her daughter's bills.

Every virtue can come with its own accompanying vice. The virtue of reticence can yield the vice of aloofness. Perkins was not emotionally vulnerable to those close to her. Her public vocation never completely compensated for her private solitude.

Duty

NEW YORK'S GOVERNOR AL SMITH WAS PERKINS'S FIRST AND GREATEST political love. He was loyal, approachable, voluble and a man with the common touch. Smith also gave Perkins her first big break in government. He appointed her to the Industrial Commission, the body that regulated workplace conditions across the Empire State. The job brought a generous $8,000 a year salary and put Perkins in the middle of the major strikes and industrial disputes. She was not only a rare woman in a man's world, she was in the manliest precincts of the man's world. She'd travel to factory towns and throw herself in the middle of bitter disputes between energized labor organizers and determined corporate executives. There is no boasting in any of her reminiscences that this was a brave and even reckless thing to do. To her, this was simply a job that needed doing. The word "one" plays a crucial role in her descriptions of her own life. Sometimes she would use the formulation "I did this," but more often her diction was formal and archaic: "One did this . . ."

Nowadays we think of the use of "one" as pompous and starched. But for Perkins it was simply a way to avoid the first person pronoun. It was a way to suggest that any proper person would of course be duty-bound to do what she had done under the circumstances.

During the 1910s and 1920s in Albany, Perkins also had occasion to work with Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He did not impress her. She found him shallow and a bit arrogant. He had a habit of throwing his head back as he spoke. Later, when he was president, that gesture suggested confidence and buoyant optimism. But when he was young, Perkins just thought it made him look supercilious.

Roosevelt disappeared from Perkins's life when he suffered his polio attack. When he returned, she felt he had changed. He almost never spoke of his illness, but Perkins felt it "purged the slightly arrogant attitude he had displayed."[38]

One day, as Roosevelt was reentering politics, Perkins sat on a stage and watched him drag himself up to the podium to deliver a speech. His hands, supporting his weight on the podium, never stopped trembling. Perkins realized that after the speech, someone would have to cover his awkward movements as he lurched down from the stand.

She gestured to a woman behind her, and as he concluded, they hurried up to Roosevelt, nominally to congratulate him, but actually to shield his movements with their skirts. Over the years, this became a routine.

Perkins admired the way Roosevelt gratefully and humbly accepted help. "I began to see what the great teachers of religion meant when they said that humility is the greatest of virtues," she later wrote, "and if you can't learn it, God will teach it to you by humiliation. Only so can a man be really great, and it was in those accommodations to necessity that Franklin Roosevelt began to approach the stature of humility and inner integrity which made him truly great."[39]

When Roosevelt was elected governor of New York, he offered Perkins the job of Industrial Commissioner. She wasn't sure she should take it, because she wasn't sure she could successfully manage an agency. "I believe that such talent as I may have for public service lies much more in the judicial and legislative work of the Department than in the administrative," she wrote in a note to Roosevelt. On the day he offered her the job, she told him that she would give him a day to reconsider, to consult with others. "If anyone says it's unwise to appoint me or will make trouble with the leaders, just disregard today. . . . I'm not going to tell anyone so you're not sewed up."[40]

Roosevelt responded, "That's very decent, I must say, but I'm not going to change my mind." He was pleased to appoint a woman to such a senior job, and Perkins's reputation as a public servant was exemplary. As one biographer, George Martin, put it, "As an administrator she was good, perhaps even more than good; as a judge or legislator she was quite extraordinary. She had a judicial temperament and a strong sense in all situations of what was fair. She was always open to new ideas and yet the moral purpose of the law, the welfare of mankind, was never overlooked."[41]

When he was elected president, Roosevelt asked Perkins to become his secretary of labor. Again, she resisted. When rumors of her potential nomination circulated during the transition, Perkins wrote FDR a letter saying that she hoped they were untrue. "You are quoted as saying that the newspaper predictions on cabinet posts are 80 percent wrong. I write to say that I honestly hope that what they've been printing about me is among the 80 percent of incorrect items. I've had my 'kick' out of the gratifying letters etc., but for your own sake and

that of the U.S.A. I think that someone straight from the ranks of some group of organized workers should be appointed—to establish firmly the principle that labor is in the President's councils."[42] She also touched lightly on her family problems, which she feared might become a distraction. Roosevelt wrote a little squib on a piece of scratch paper and sent it back: "Have considered your advice and don't agree."[43]

Perkins's grandmother had told her that when somebody opens a door, you should always walk through. So Perkins confronted FDR with terms if she was to become his labor secretary. If she were to join the cabinet, FDR would have to commit to a broad array of social insurance policies: massive unemployment relief, a giant public works program, minimum wage laws, a Social Security program for old age insurance, and the abolition of child labor. "I suppose you are going to nag me about this forever," Roosevelt told her. She confirmed she would.

Perkins was one of only two top aides to stay with Roosevelt for his entire term as president. She became one of the tireless champions of the New Deal. She was central to the creation of the Social Security system. She was a major force behind many of the New Deal jobs programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Federal Works Agency, and the Public Works Administration. Through the Fair Labor Standards Act she established the nation's first minimum wage law and its first overtime law. She sponsored federal legislation on child labor and unemployment insurance. During World War II she resisted calls to draft women, sensing that women would benefit more over the long run if they could take the jobs that were being abandoned by drafted men.

Perkins excelled at reading Franklin Roosevelt. After he died, Perkins wrote a biographical work, *The Roosevelt I Knew,* which remains one of the most astute character sketches ever written about the man. Overshadowing all Roosevelt's decisions, Perkins wrote, "was his feeling that nothing in human judgment is final. One may courageously take the step that seems right today because it can be modified tomorrow if it does not work well." He was an improviser, not a planner. He took a step and adjusted, a step and adjusted. Gradually a big change would emerge.

This mentality develops, she continued, in "a man who is more an

instrument than an engineer. The prophets of Israel would have called him an instrument of the Lord. The prophets of today could only explain his type of mind in terms of psychology, about which they know so pitiably little."[44]

Perkins devised a strategy to deal with this man who was prone to changing his mind and shifting direction depending upon who was the last adviser he encountered. Before her meeting with the president she would prepare a one-page memo outlining the concrete options before him. They would go over her outline and Roosevelt would state his preference. Then Perkins would force him to repeat himself: "Do you authorize me to go ahead with this? Are you sure?"

They would have a little more discussion, and then Perkins would underline his decision a second time: "Are you sure you want item number one? Do you want items number two and three? You understand that this is what we do and this is who is opposed?" The purpose of this exercise was to sear a photograph of the decision into Roosevelt's memory. Then she would ask him a third time, asking him whether he explicitly remembered his decision and understood the opposition he would face. "Is that all right? Is it still okay?"

FDR did not always stand up for Perkins when she needed it. He was too slippery a politician to extend loyalty downward all of the time. She was not popular with many of the men in the cabinet. For one thing, she had a tendency to go on at meetings. She was certainly not popular with the press. Her sense of privacy and her fierce desire to protect her husband prevented her from hanging around with reporters or ever letting down her guard. The reporters, in turn, were unsympathetic.

As the years went by, she became exhausted by the job. Her reputation waned. Twice she sent Roosevelt a letter of resignation and twice he rejected it. "Frances, you can't go now. You mustn't put this on me now," Roosevelt pleaded. "I can't think of anybody else. I can't get used to anyone else. Not now! Do stay there and don't say anything. You are all right."

In 1939 she became the target of impeachment proceedings. The case revolved around an Australian longshoreman named Harry Bridges who led a general strike in San Francisco. Bridges's critics called him a Communist and demanded that he be deported for subversive activities. When the Soviet Union fell and the files were

opened, it turned out they were right. Bridges was a Communist agent, known by the code name Rossi.[45]

But at the time, that wasn't so clear. Deportation hearings, operated by the Labor Department, dragged on. In 1937, more evidence against Bridges surfaced, and in 1938, the department began proceedings to deport him. These proceedings were blocked by a court decision, which was then appealed to the Supreme Court. The delay inflamed Bridges's critics, which included business groups and the leaders of rival unions.

Perkins bore the brunt of their criticism. Why was the labor secretary shielding a subversive? One congressman accused her of being a Russian Jew and a Communist herself. In January 1939, J. Parnell Thomas of New Jersey introduced impeachment charges against her. The press coverage was brutal. Franklin Roosevelt was given a chance to rise to her defense, but, wary of soiling his own reputation by association, he just let her hang out there. Most of her allies in Congress remained silent, too. The Federation of Women's Clubs also refused to defend her. *The New York Times* wrote an ambiguous editorial. The common sentiment was that she was in fact a Communist, and nobody wanted to get in the line of fire of those who were persecuting her. It was left to the Tammany Hall pols to remain reliably steadfast beside her.

Perkins's grandmother had always told her that when social disaster strikes, "all are to act as though nothing had happened." Perkins soldiered on. Her description of that period is awkwardly phrased but revealing. "Of course if I had wept at all, or if I'd let myself down at all, I would have disintegrated," Perkins said later. "That's the kind of person which we New Englanders are. We disintegrate if we do these things. All the qualities in us of integrity and the ability to keep our heads clear and make decisions and take actions that are influenced by our personal suffering or personal effect on ourselves, that integrity would have been scattered, and I would not have had that inner core within myself which makes it possible for me to rely upon myself under the guidance of God to do the right thing."[46]

Put in plain language, Perkins was aware that there was a fragility within herself. If she relaxed the hold she had on herself, then all might fall apart. Over the years, Perkins had made frequent visits to the All Saints Convent in Catonsville, Maryland. She would go to the

convent for two or three days at a time, gathering for prayers five times a day, eating simple meals, and tending the gardens. She spent most of those days in silence, and when the nuns came to mop her floor, they sometimes had to mop around her, for she was on her knees in prayer. During the impeachment crisis, Perkins visited the convent whenever she could. "I have discovered the rule of silence is one of the most beautiful things in the world," she wrote to a friend. "It preserves one from the temptation of the idle world, the fresh remark, the wisecrack, the angry challenge. . . . It is really quite remarkable what it does for one."[47]

She also reflected on a distinction that had once seemed unimportant to her. When a person gives a poor man shoes, does he do it for the poor man or for God? He should do it for God, she decided. The poor will often be ungrateful, and you will lose heart if you rely on immediate emotional rewards for your work. But if you do it for God, you will never grow discouraged. A person with a deep vocation is not dependent on constant positive reinforcement. The job doesn't have to pay off every month, or every year. The person thus called is performing a task because it is intrinsically good, not for what it produces.

Finally, on February 8, 1939, Perkins was able to meet her accusers. She appeared before the House Judiciary Committee as it considered articles of impeachment against her. She delivered a long and detailed recitation of the administrative procedures initiated against Bridges, the reasons for them, and the legal constraints preventing further action. The questions ranged from the skeptical to the brutal. When opponents made vicious charges against her, she asked them to repeat their question, believing that no person can be scurrilous twice. The photographs of the hearing make her look haggard and exhausted, but she impressed the committee with her detailed knowledge of the case.

Eventually, in March, the committee ruled that there were insufficient facts to support impeachment. She was cleared, but the report was vague and elliptical. It generated little press coverage and her reputation was permanently marred. Unable to resign, she soldiered on in the administration for another six years, helping out mostly behind the scenes. She was stoic about it all, never showing any public weakness or any self-pity. After her government service ended, when

she could have written a memoir to give her side of the story, she declined.

During the Second World War, she served as an administrative troubleshooter. She urged Roosevelt to do something to help European Jewry. She became alarmed by the way federal action was beginning to infringe on privacy and civil liberties.

When FDR died in 1945, she was finally released from the cabinet, though President Truman asked her to serve on the Civil Service Commission. Instead of writing that memoir, she wrote a book about Roosevelt instead. It was a tremendous success, but it contains very little autobiography.

Perkins did not really experience private joy until the end of her life. In 1957, a young labor economist asked her to teach a course at Cornell. The job paid about $10,000 a year, scarcely more than she had earned decades before as New York Industrial Commissioner, but she needed the money to pay for her daughter's mental health care.

At first, she lived in residential hotels during her time in Ithaca, but she was then invited to live in a small bedroom at Telluride House, a sort of fraternity house for some of Cornell's most gifted students. She was delighted by the invitation. "I feel like a bride on her wedding night!" she told friends.[48] While there, she drank bourbon with the boys and tolerated their music at all hours.[49] She attended the Monday house meetings, though she rarely spoke. She gave them copies of Baltasar Gracian's *The Art of Worldly Wisdom,* a seventeenth-century guidebook by a Spanish Jesuit priest on how to retain one's integrity while navigating the halls of power. She became close friends with Allan Bloom, a young professor who would go on to achieve fame as the author of *The Closing of the American Mind.* Some of the boys had trouble understanding how this small, charming, and unassuming old lady could have played such an important historical role.

She did not like airplanes and traveled alone by bus, sometimes having to make four or five connections to get to a funeral or a lecture. She tried to destroy some of her papers, to foil future biographers. She traveled with a copy of her will in her handbag, so that if she died she "wouldn't cause any trouble."[50] She died alone, in a hospital, on May 14, 1965, at age eighty-five. A few of the Telluride House boys served as pallbearers, including Paul Wolfowitz, who would go on to serve in the Reagan and Bush administrations. The minister read the

"be ye steadfast" passage from 1 Corinthians that Perkins herself had read upon her graduation from Mount Holyoke College more than six decades before.

If you look back at her college yearbook photo, you see a small, cute, almost mousy young lady. It would be hard to foresee from that vulnerable expression that she would be able to endure so much hardship—the mental illnesses of her husband and daughter, the ordeal of being the solitary woman in a hypermasculine world, the decades of political battles and negative press.

But it would also be hard to foresee how much she would accomplish throughout the hardship. She faced her own weaknesses—laziness, glibness—early in life and steeled herself for a life of total commitment. She suppressed her own identity so she could lobby for her cause. She took on every new challenge and remained as steadfast as her motto. She was, as Kirstin Downey would put it in the title of her fine biography, "The Woman Behind the New Deal."

On the one hand she was a fervent liberal activist, of the sort we are familiar with today. But she combined this activism with reticent traditionalism, hesitancy, and a puritanical sensibility. Daring in politics and economics, she was conservative in morality. She practiced a thousand little acts of self-discipline to guard against self-indulgence, self-glorification, or, until the impeachment and the end of her life, self-reflection. Her rectitude and reticence pinched her private life and made her bad at public relations. But it helped her lead a summoned life, a life in service to a vocation.

Perkins didn't so much choose her life. She responded to the call of a felt necessity. A person who embraces a calling doesn't take a direct route to self-fulfillment. She is willing to surrender the things that are most dear, and by seeking to forget herself and submerge herself she finds a purpose that defines and fulfills herself. Such vocations almost always involve tasks that transcend a lifetime. They almost always involve throwing yourself into a historical process. They involve compensating for the brevity of life by finding membership in a historic commitment. As Reinhold Niebuhr put it in 1952:

> Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.[51]