

FINDING ONESELF by Robert Bellah

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 everywhere 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 today, 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-

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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 psychoanalysts 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 opponent 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 spans 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 that 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 careers.

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 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 we 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 leagues 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 employees 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 folks 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 to 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 identity 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 or 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 or 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 individualist 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 called 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 vestiges 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 bedeviled 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, clothing, 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, it 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, community, 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 reject. 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.

NOTES

1. The best-documented study of some of the changes to which we are referring is Joseph Veroff, Elizabeth Douvan, and Richard A. Kulka, *The Inner American: A Self-Portrait from 1957 to 1976* (New York: Basic Books, 1981). This study is based on two large-scale national sample surveys some twenty years apart. Some of the changes they document as having occurred between 1957 and 1976 are a shift toward "a more *personal* or *individual* paradigm for structuring well-being" and "*an increase in Americans' self-expressive and self-directive reactions to their adjustment*" (pp. 529-30). Emphasis in original.

2. Thomas Jefferson, *The Complete*

Jefferson, ed. Saul K. Padover (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1943), p.33.

3. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), pp. 261, 262.

4. Daniel Calhoun, *The Intelligence of a People* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 143-47.

5. For Locke's views see his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* in John Locke, *Educational Writings*, ed. James L. Axtell (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968). It is worth remembering that Locke's *First Treatise of Government* was a refutation of Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha*, a defense of monarchy as continuous with patriarchy. See John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (London: Cambridge University Press, 1963). The pattern of American child-rearing influenced by Locke is close to what Philip Greven calls the "moderate Protestant temperament" in *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (New York: Knopf, 1977), part 3.

6. Hervé Varenne, *Americans Together: Structured Diversity in a Midwestern Town* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1977), pp. 185-86.

7. Varenne, *Americans Together*, chapters 8 and 9.

8. Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, pp. 259, 260.

9. Gallup Opinion Index, *Religion in America* (Princeton, N.J.: American Institute of Public Opinion, 1981).

10. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), chapter 10.

11. See Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), chapters 13, 16, 18, 20; especially pp. 201-8, 245-51, 330-40. Compare George Vaillant, *Adaptations to Life* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977), pp. 215-30.

12. Gail Sheehy, *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1977), chapter 20.

13. See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chapter 14.

14. Sheehy, *Passages*, p. 364.

15. Frances FitzGerald, "Sun City Center," *New Yorker*, April 25, 1983, pp. 61, 90-93.

16. Sheehy, *Passages*, p. 364.

17. Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982). For a philosophical critique of a conception of the self emptied of specific moral character, sentiments, and ends, as entailed by both utilitarian and Kantian ethics, including John Rawls's contractarianism, see Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality" in *The Identity of Persons*, ed. Amélie O. Rorty (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 197-216, and his "A Critique of Utilitarianism" in J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973). See also Charles Taylor, "Responsibility for Self" in *Identity of Persons*, ed. Rorty, pp. 281-99.

18. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Niddich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), book 2, chapter 27, paragraph 6, pp. 331-32.

19. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1959). See also Phillip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), on this point and on the argument of this chapter in general.

20. FitzGerald, "Sun City Center," p. 90.