The Professionalized Self: Learning to Succeed in a Middle-Class World

Melvyn L Fein, Kennesaw State University

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Learning to Succeed in a Middle Class World

Melvyn L. Fein
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Dedicated to the memory of Noel Martlock.
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Preface

The Professionalized Self

When I began writing this work, the intention was to publish it as a trade book. The goal was to make it available to a larger audience than my previous academic works. Much to my frustration I discovered that publishers would not even consider it unless an agent submitted it to them. I therefore undertook to find and agent, which I eventually did. This was followed by even more frustration as publishers indicated that they were still unprepared to accept my manuscript. One was very explicit in explaining her reasons. It was she said “too intelligent” for a broad audience.

Now I have decided to publish on the Internet. My goal remains a wide readership rather than a profit per se. Now it will be up to you, the readers who find these materials, to decide for yourselves. Is it too intelligent for a general readership? Or, as I hope, is it applicable to your personal circumstances. If it is; if it helps you become more of what you hope to be, I will be satisfied. I will have achieved my objective.

Happy reading!
Chapter 1

A Professional World

Let Me Do It

The Kings Highway section of Brooklyn is flat: very flat. It is situated on an outwash plain left over from the last glaciation. When the ice from that event began to recede, the overflow poured across the terminal moraine to spread an even layer of fertile mud over many square miles of what eventually became prime farmland. In due course, however, the area’s agricultural pursuits gave way to neat grids of detached, working class houses. My grandparents occupied one of these structures. Small and compact, thanks to the area’s history it boasted a tiny barn squarely in far end of the back yard. Still painted a traditional red and white, this modest edifice had long since been converted into a workshop. Grandpa Simon had begun his American career as a wagon painter, and then a house painter, but ultimately his ambition and talent led him to establish his own contractor business. Devoted primarily to domestic renovations, he called it Dun-rite because he thought this a clever way to advertise his skills. This rustic workshop was the place where he kept his many tools and supplies. It was also where he occasionally completed job-related chores.

This long ago morning he had a project afoot. Apparently this one was so complex he needed to ask my father’s assistance. My dad, Sam, had become a self-taught electronic engineer, but earlier served apprenticeships in carpentry and plumbing. Electronics eventually displaced these pursuits, partly because it was cutting edge technology and partly because building his own radio sets, when radios were brand spanking new, fascinated him. Blessed with a penetrating intelligence, he was a whiz at
the troubleshooting originally required to keep these intricate, vacuum tube-based circuits running. So good was he at this that in later years he would be employed installing radar systems in jet fighters. Nevertheless, he had not gone to college. In fact, he was so uncomfortable with reading that he learned about transistors by having my mother recite to him from a textbook. The woodworking he was today requested to do was more in line with his comfort zone. Extremely proficient at visualizing three-dimensional configurations, he also took pleasure in physically manipulating concrete materials to produce a tangible result. Carpentry allowed him to do both.

At the time, I was probably no more than six years old. Having only freshly entered grammar school, I had no idea of what my elders were up to. All I understood was that this was important; that it was somehow an indicator of manhood. This knowledge was, however, enough for me to want to join their labors. It is even likely that I made a pest of myself by importuning them for an assignment. Reluctantly my father agreed to let me cut a two-by-four in half. At this, he placed a crosscut saw in my hands and ordered me to proceed. From my perspective, this instrument was an unwieldy piece of metal that, much to my horror, refused to stay straight. Whenever I pushed down on the wood, it bent. Similar to the kinds of saw some vaudevillians employ to make music, the darn thing bowed into an arc that immediately jumped back to its original shape whenever I let up the pressure. Utterly frustrated, I could not imagine what to do next.

Looking on at this ineptitude, my father was the essence of exasperation. Barely able to contain his impatience, he scowled at me as he barked out orders that I do the job right. This, however, only increased my discomfort. Already anxious because I knew things weren’t going well, I neared panic as a realized that I had no inkling of what was
needed to correct the situation. Thoroughly self-conscious, my head emptied of all thoughts; save those connected with a desire for safety. Feeling torn almost in half, I did not know whether to look at Dad or the board beside my knee. This frozen terror seemed to last forever, although it probably went on for less than a minute. My father was not the sort of person to suffer fools gladly; and in his eyes I had been revealed to be a fool. Unable to carry out the simplest directions, I was an embarrassment to him. That he should have produced a male child this inept was beyond bearing. Not only was I interfering with his workflow; I demonstrated a lack of mechanical aptitude that reflected badly on his genetic endowment.

Within seconds my father pushed me aside. Roughly wrenching the saw from my grip, he angrily spit out the words. “Let me do it. You can’t do anything right!” Then he tore through the wood, which parted almost instantly. My excursion into carpentry was now over. Both my father and grandfather had been deeply occupied with their project before I made my presence felt; afterwards I was completely excluded from their company. Feeling small and isolated, I retreated from the backyard. Totally convinced I did not possess the stuff of real men, all I wanted was to hide my shame. Ever afterwards I would shy away from physically oriented tasks. Why would I want to embarrass myself by exposing my inadequacies? Many years in the future, upon entering the army, I was tested to determine what military specialty suited me. According to these measurements my mechanical aptitude was in the 99th percentile. Utterly shocked, this was out of line with my self-image. I, after all, was the boy who could not master a handsaw. Had I been aware of my underlying abilities when I was small, it might have made a difference,
but this knowledge was then unavailable to me. All I knew is that I failed and it was probably my fault.

What did not occur to me was that my father could have proceeded differently. I knew he was harsh, but I assumed that all fathers were. If he grew impatient, it was because impatience was needed to drive home crucial lessons. I was simply too sensitive to profit from his tutelage. That he might have quietly explained how to use a saw never entered my head. Such explanations were not something in which he indulged. That he might have demonstrated how to hold the tool was also inconceivable. This sort of modeling was not part of his repertoire. Moreover, that he might actually have offered words of encouragement, or solace afterwards, was unimaginable. This would have been tantamount to treating me as a sissy, something he would never deign to do. No, he had responded in the only way real men could. I was sure the problem was me—and how I reacted under pressure.

What I did not understand was that although my father occupied a professional job, he retained a working class mentality. He believed that mistakes were a sign of weakness. In line with the advice offered by John Wayne in the classic western She Wore a Yellow Ribbon, he believed that one should never apologize for errors. He also believed that one should never make errors, that these were evidence of incompetence. When faced with a novel challenge, it was up to a real man to do it correctly the first time, and every time thereafter. To do less opened one to justifiable criticism. So convinced was he of this, that I was regularly bombarded by reminders of my failures. Years after a slip-up, he would recall it in conjunction with a more recent lapse. As far as he was concerned, I was a clumsy weakling; who from birth had never been anything but
a disappointment. Even so, despite the fact that I was hopeless, it was his duty to
hammer me into shape. Perhaps if he engaged in this with sufficient vigor, I might one
day make him proud.

Dad’s archetype of the appropriate behavior was exemplified by an incident that
occurred when he was a boy. Living on New York’s Lower East Side, he was required to
fend for himself. With a mother who suffered from diabetes and a father who worked
sunrise to sunset as proprietor of a local candy store, he was largely on his own—what
his future brother-in-law would describe as a “street kid.” In any event, he and his
friends were in charge of their own entertainments. In the summer this meant retreating
to the East River to dunk in its cooling, albeit polluted, waters. One day his chums
unexpectedly threw him off the pier. It was literally sink or swim, and fortunately for
him he managed to swim. In the ensuing years, by dint of great effort, he became a
strong swimmer. Not surprisingly, he took enormous pride in this accomplishment. Why
could his son not do the same? Why not, when thrown into the “carpentry pool,” didn’t I
immediately develop the proper skills? Surely this wasn’t asking too much. Using a saw
was far less dangerous than swimming in deep water; hence should engender less anxiety.
Any boy worthy of his salt would simply do it—and do it without complaint.

In Dad’s mind there were two kinds of people—winners and losers. The
difference between them was a matter of character. Some individuals were basically
tougher and more talented than others. Made of better stuff, this eventually shown
through. Much as medieval aristocrats believed in the efficacy of their bluer blood, he
placed his faith in innate personal qualities. As such, there was little that could be done
to correct a defective disposition. If someone were weak, he could be driven to perform,
but not to become significantly stronger. Once the die was cast, it was out of the hands of
even a loving father. Donald McGregor has argued that prior to the twentieth century
American businessmen believed in what he has called “Theory X.” This holds that
workingmen are essentially lazy. Left to their own devices, they try to get away with
doing as little as possible. It is, therefore, up to bosses to exercise close supervision.
They have to keep a wary eye out for deviations and correct these instantly. Ordinary
workers have to be told what to do and then forced, on pain of substantial sanctions, to do
it. My father agreed. In pushing me aside when I did not do as expected, he was doing
no more than enforcing high-quality workmanship; workmanship that had to be enforced
when dealing with inadequate human material. Only this would keep an indolent
shoulder to the wheel.

What never occurred to Dad was that this was not the best way to prepare a child
to assume professional responsibilities. Although himself a quasi-professional, he
thought in terms of obedience and punishment. A subordinate was merely to do as
required, without question or protest. The boss would give an order and the worker, in
this case his son, must hop to do his bidding. In the military they say that when a
sergeant says jump, the recruit should ask: “How high?” This is what my father expected
of his subordinates. It was the world in which he had grown up and one he assumed
would last into the indefinite future. Had he been asked what sorts of lessons produced
professional offspring, he would have been mystified. Professionalism was for other
people. It was for doctors and lawyers; for high muckety-mucks with college educations
and fancy degrees. It was the prerogative of those who worked in offices, not those who
worked with their hands. Even though he now used his head on the job, his emotions
remained with the manual apprenticeships of his youth. These were what he knew best and what his son needed to know as well.

**Real Doctors**

Back in Brooklyn almost every mother aspired to have a son who became a doctor. Doctors were the epitome of success. Doctors made lots of money and received tons of prestige. They lived in good neighborhoods, married beautiful wives, and sired handsome children. As importantly, for the Jewish mothers of my acquaintance, doctors were smart. They were the smartest people around and, therefore, the most worthy. When one of my friends went on to graduate school to earn a Ph.D. in economics his mother was proud of him. She raced around the neighborhood bragging about her son “the doctor.” When questioned, however, she sheepishly admitted that he was not a “real” doctor. He was not a medical doctor; merely a college professor. Pleased though she was, in her heart-of-hearts, she knew this was second best. Her son might be a professional, but not an archetypical professional. That was reserved for the occupational aristocrats with stethoscopes draped around their necks.

In this, she was not, of course, alone. Most Americans hold doctors in awe. When they enter the examination room, they do so with a figurative cap in hand. The doctor is the expert; the neighborhood sage. He or she is the one into whose abilities one entrusts one’s health, and, therefore, life. When a doctor makes a recommendation, it is assumed to be authoritative. Not only is he or she super-intelligent, and super-knowledgeable, but dedicated to the patients’ best interests. Far from being a theory X worker, he/she is internally committed to doing his/her best—all of the time. Physicians don’t make accurate diagnoses because they fear a supervisor’s wrath. Nor do they
recommend specific treatments in order to please their bosses. Doctors are their own bosses. Even when they work for bureaucratic organizations, they control their work product. The doctor is respected because he (she) cares. The very essence of a professional, a physician wants to get things right every time—and generally does.

But how did this happen? How did physicians come to occupy such an elevated position? Although contemporary surveys invariably place doctors near the apex of public approbation, this was not always so. In the not too distant past, while they were respected, they were not deemed upper class and often not even upper middle class. Surgeons, who are today among the most revered practitioners, were until recently indistinguishable from barbers. When not cutting hair, they were lopping off hands and feet with hacksaws. Even gentlemen doctors, who treated upper class patients, were quasi-servants. They might put on airs of semi-nobility, but despite their ruffled shirts were required to consult the chamber pots of their clients in order to produce a diagnosis. Nonetheless, their pretensions made them unwilling to soil their hands by physically manipulating patients. This was delegated to lesser retainers. The bottom line was that most of the time they were only reluctantly called in to treat desperate cases. Their incompetence was common knowledge, as were the imprints of death strewn along their path.

Samuel Peyps, in his famous diary, declared his disinclination to go under the knife for urinary stones. Painfully aware that many of his contemporaries had perished under similar ministrations, he preferred the agony of an untreated condition. In his day, which was little more than three hundred years ago, the patient who survived an operation usually succumbed to the ensuing infection. Physicians knew nothing about
antiseptic procedures, nor did they possess effective means of anesthesia. Best known today for their enthusiastic bloodletting, almost any ailment would drive the doctor to use the lancet. Essentially a small scalpel, this instrument was employed to open a patient’s veins before leeches were found to be a more humane alternative. Harking back to ancient Greek sources, most physicians were convinced that illness was caused by an imbalance of bodily humors. Persuaded that blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile must be present in the correct ratios, they were determined to re-establish the optimum proportions. Since the volume of blood was easiest to manipulate, it was generally the first choice. So salutary was this considered, that when a first bloodletting failed to achieve the expected result, a second, or a third was ordered. In many cases, such as that of George Washington, the patient expired before the cure took effect. Like many of his peers, our first president essentially died of a cold ministered to with excess zeal.

How little was understood about the functioning of the human body is revealed by the attitudes toward hysteria. This condition, which had first been identified by the Greeks, was named for the organ thought responsible. Only women were believed to exhibit the extreme emotionality associated with the diagnosis because only they possessed the wombs deemed to be its source. Until the time of the Renaissance, it was assumed that patients became hysterical when their uteruses broke loose from their moorings and traveled around the body. In order to cure them, one either rubbed honey on the vulva to attract the organ back to its rightful place or placed smelling salts under the nose to scare it back down. Even after anatomists demonstrated that the womb was not free to wander about, its role in hysteria was taken for granted. Now physicians hypothesized that a kind of gas emanated from the womb to befuddle the female brain.
Called “vapors,” these were implicated in feminine complaints well into the nineteenth century.

Not until little more than a hundred years ago was it recognized that “germs,” for example, bacteria and viruses, caused many illnesses. The existence of microscopic creatures had been known since the time of Leeuwenhoek, but no one supposed that these animalcules could kill or seriously discomfort a creature as large as a human being. Far more credible were miasmas arising from swamps and/or magnetic vibrations radiating from the moon. Reputable doctors even refused to wash their hands between operations on the premise that this was an old wife’s tale. They, by this means, managed to transfer infections from one patient to another. But since no one was keeping track, they denied the connection. As a result of such procedures, most rational observers were convinced that the hospital was a place one went to die, rather than be cured. Indeed, it was not until about the time of World War I that going to a physician improved one’s chances of survival. Before that medicine was esteemed because there was little choice.

In his book *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*, Paul Starr describes an early crisis in the field. He writes that “according to the usual explanations, medical sects grew in the mid-nineteenth century because of the inadequacy of contemporary medicine, particularly the disastrous errors of ‘heroic therapy,’ which emphasized bleeding, heavy doses of mercury, and other modes of treatment now believed to range from the ineffective to the lethal.” There was, however, more to this development than that. There were also the effects of professional politics. Into what was acknowledged to be a therapeutic vacuum marched battalions of herbalists and homeopaths. Loudly proclaiming the virtues of their techniques, these alternative healers
tirelessly agitated for their less dangerous options. Thus, the herbalists placed their faith in a cornucopia of botanical drugs. For almost any condition, they found an exotic concoction supposedly adapted to restore health. The homeopaths, in contrast, believed that the smaller the dosage of a medication, the more effective it was. Neither approach worked very well, but, then again, they were not demonstrably worse than their mainstream competitors. Incongruous though it today seems, both of these factions were better systematized than traditional medicine. In particular, the medical schooling they promoted was more methodical than the apprenticeships that had been the standard medical education. Judged by laypersons to be no less scientific than the older schools of thought, these oddball disciplines eventually merged with their better-known rival. Indeed, the herbalists and homeopaths were able to obtain state licensure, just as had their longer-established colleagues. In time, once medical colleges came into being, all three contributed to their faculties. Ultimately, the lines between them vanished as advances in knowledge influenced all three.

The traditional physicians were, to be sure, initially outraged by the pretensions of these upstarts. The problem was that they could not stop them. Their lack of effectiveness was such that they did not possess the prestige to do so. The ordinary citizens who controlled state legislatures would not certify a monopoly they did not believe justified. Why, they asked, should they prevent these new methodologies from practicing? They were no worse than their older competitors. What was eventually to modify this verdict was the increased scientific grounding of the traditionalists. Medicine had long been considered a “calling” in the sense that doctors were believed to enjoy a semi-theological mandate. Because good health has always been regarded as imperative,
those who sought to preserve it claimed a spiritual sanction. Like priests and ministers, God purportedly chose them for their occupation. Tapped on the shoulder by an omniscient providence to serve the helpless, this compelled them to make honest exertions on behalf of their patients. The Greeks had long since instituted the Hippocratic oath as a guarantee of medical trustworthiness and this carried forward through the millennia. Even today doctors are pledged to alleviate suffering. They continue to vow to do no harm. As such, they can presumably be depended upon. The problem was that a legacy of pain and mortality sullied medical reputations. Being heaven’s favorites was insufficient to certify communal veneration as long as there was such a huge downside to seeking medical aid. It was only the emergence of a genuine expertise that was to make a lasting difference.

In the end, medicine’s spiritual mandate was supplanted by a respect based upon ground-level performance. Doctors became authentic experts. They were transformed into specialists who actually delivered better health. For the ordinary person, good intentions were one thing; an ability to restore well-being was another. As scientific knowledge of the human body grew, and as training in anatomy and physiology became standard, the confidence of laypersons in medicine rose. No longer was the profession a form of magic. It became a locus of reproducible results. With wonder drugs and intricate surgical procedures coming upon the scene, cures were no longer a matter of chance. The upshot was that those who controlled these interventions earned the approbation of those whom they benefited. This was when doctors became “professionals” in the sense we today recognize. This was when they attained the combination of knowledge and internal motivation that is honored with a prestige not
accorded lesser occupations. In participating in this development, physicians, unbeknownst to themselves, became pathfinders for a radical approach to social organization. Other occupations too would shortly follow their example in the journey toward professionalism. In so doing, they too opened the door to modernity. These others also became competent role players worthy of both respect and authority.

The Man on the Beat

Unlike my father’s ideal, doctors are not expected to understand everything about medicine all at once. Despite the exalted qualities attributed to them, it is widely recognized that they gain their proficiencies through years of intense study. Although they may eventually be regarded as nearly God-like and will be prosecuted for malpractice if they fail to live up to standards of perfection, this is not how they begin their careers. Like everyone else, prospective physicians start life as unformed children. No one is born equipped with sophisticated medical insights. Infants have no idea of how to treat a scraped knee, never mind a myocardial infarction. Later on, when looking forward to the prospect of becoming doctors, most high school students find the impending obstacles daunting. However bright they may be, when pondering a future dedicated to years of protracted study, most wonder if they have the appropriate makeup. Nowadays, four requisite years of college will not seem so difficult. These have become conventional for the vocationally ambitious. What is more intimidating is the need to earn grades sufficiently high to vault over the competition for the limited number of slots in medical school. Accumulating a bouquet of A’s in basket weaving will not do. They must gravitate toward the top of their class in subjects as challenging as organic chemistry and mathematics. For most, this requires unremitting hours of study. While
less determined friends are out drinking beer or partying until dawn, they become
“grinds” dedicated to long nights of memorizing a host of less than scintillating materials.

Should these pre-med students do well enough to be among the chosen few, they
now face four more years of concentrated effort. The facts they now have to commit to
memory grow in scope, at the same time that the hours necessary to incorporate them
grow scarcer. At this point, almost hermetically sealed in a world populated by similar
grinds, the pressures to perform escalate. Information that others find too exotic to attract
notice become the stuff of their everyday lives. But more than this, what is learned
must, in time, be applied to actual human beings. Soon enough would-be doctors enter
an internship where the hearts they study are in human chests, rather than textbooks. The
demands made of them now come from their patients, as well as from professors,
classmates, and family members. In due course, the penalty for failure is not a lower
grade, but the infliction of human misery. When they make mistakes, the consequence is
anguish and even death.

Once these hurdles are surmounted, and the prospective physician is now
addressed as “doctor,” but the challenges are not over. The successful intern must
immediately become a successful resident. At this point attached to a hospital, she (he)
will be responsible for patient care. From the point of view of laypersons, she will have
arrived at a professional status, whereas from that of her colleagues, she is a neophyte.
As a resident, she will be charged with learning by doing. She is then expected to gain
experience in general medicine by dealing with a wide range of maladies. After this,
while still living in relative poverty, comes training in a specialty. If a physician is
ultimately to be board certified, she (he) needs to endure another four years learning
about the human heart or perhaps oncology. Surgical or diagnostic skills have to be mastered such that she becomes an authority in her chosen discipline. Now more knowledgeable about a particular aspect of human suffering than all but a handful of other human beings, she is expected to have answers laypersons do not. At this point, less able to turn to other authorities for advice, she is increasingly thrown on her own devices. Even when she consults more experienced colleagues, it is up to her to determine the specific course of action.

Still, the passage to becoming a professional has not reached its conclusion. Skilled physicians do not complete their education upon becoming board certified. Continued competence demands that they become lifelong learners. Even without teachers to prod them to study specific topics, they subscribe to, and read, journals in their specialties. They must also travel to conferences at which they will be introduced to new techniques and/or cutting-edge medications. Now surrounded by colleagues upon whose opinions their reputations depend, they persist in working long hours. At this juncture, although probably earning a significant income, they do not slack off. Despite having reached a pinnacle of social esteem, they continue to participate in the activities that got them where they are. One of the reasons for this is that the process of enduring a professional socialization has changed their identities. After going through what amounts to a rite of passage, they come to think of themselves as “doctors.” As such, their self-esteem is dependent upon being “good” doctors. Were they to accomplish less, they would experience guilt. In their own eyes no longer professional, they would cease perceiving themselves as worthy of respect. This, however, would mean losing the social approbation they have long sought and with it the admiration that made them feel good
about themselves. For most physicians, this is unthinkable. Having expended so much
energy to get where they are, they are not about to give it up out of sloth.

For police officers the situation is different. Or at least it used to be. There was a
time when no one would have confused being a “cop” with being a professional. To
compare the man on the beat with a physician would have seemed ludicrous. Police
officers were working stiffs. They were blue-collar guys who worked with their bodies,
not their minds. Overwhelmingly uneducated, they were first cousins to ditch diggers
and construction workers. A century or so ago all that was needed to become a
policeman was a large frame and a willingness to employ force to maintain the peace.
Those with the ability to don a uniform and carry a nightstick exhibited the requisite
skills. This allowed recent immigrants from Ireland to march straight off the boat and
onto the force. The right political connections or a relative already serving on the force,
provided entry. For the Irish, most of whom had been unlettered peasants in the old
country, it was either this or a shovel with which to excavate the Erie Canal.

Nor was the line between law-abiding and law-breaking hard and fixed. In the
old West it was not unusual for a cowboy to drift from being a lawman to a bank robber.
This was the situation with the infamous Dalton clan. Several of the brothers had been in
law enforcement before they turned to a more lucrative, if less legal, employment. They,
to be sure, were gunned down in a grandiose scheme to rob two banks at once. Others,
like Wyatt Earp were luckier. Although he was a professional gambler who skirted the
edge of legitimacy, he is today remembered, not for a disputed card game he played with
the even less savory Ike Clanton, but for having shot it out with him at the OK Corral the
following day. In the old West there were few reference checks before a sheriff, or even
a U.S. Marshall, was hired. Proficiency with a gun and a readiness to tangle with tough customers was considered satisfactory. This was clearly so for the Prince of the Pistoleers, i.e., Wild Bill Hickok.

How different things are today. Even a good character and rippling muscles are no longer adequate. Those who serve as police officers must also demonstrate the intelligence, and emotional stability, to manage a complex occupation. Merely being a bullyboy will not do. In fact, such an attitude can get an officer into trouble. Those who stopped Rodney King for a routine traffic offence could attest to this. Wild Bill and his cronies might draw a six-shooter to kill a rowdy cowboy without facing significant repercussions. The Los Angeles policemen who beat King with batons had no such luck. Although King was caught on videotape charging into them evidently intent on inflicting physical damage, they were accused of brutality for meting out blows after he had already been subdued. They were supposed to realize that it was their job to utilize the least force consistent with performing their duties. When they saw a man down and unable to defend himself, whatever the initial provocation, they were required to exercise self-control. A failure to do so not only violated departmental regulations; it invited criminal prosecution.

Nowadays, police officers are in the process of professionalizing. They may not be in the same league as physicians, but they too are required to exhibit an expertise and internalized motivation far above that of their forebears. While they do not undergo a socialization as rigorous as that of doctors, they are expected to spend years learning their craft. Vetted far more carefully than their predecessors, they begin this process with personal qualities more in harmony with professionalism than street fighting. Usually
required to possess a high school diploma and a clean criminal record, frequently they will not be hired, or promoted, unless they acquire a higher education. While almost all police departments require recruits to complete a tour at a police academy, many give preference to candidates with a college degree in criminal justice. Once upon a time the notion of a university specialty in policing skills seemed laughable. It would have been considered an oxymoron and dismissed out of hand. Today, however, this is one of the fastest growing university disciplines. Both in terms of the number of students enrolled and the research efforts of their faculties, it is one of the more active corners of academe.

The need for this expansion is on display on the television series Law and Order. The first half of these shows typically begin with a police investigation that leads to the apprehension of a suspect. The second half is dedicated to the district attorneys assigned to prosecute the perpetrators. All too often, at some point during the latter segment, a judge throws out a critical piece of evidence. One of the grounds is often that the investigating officers engaged in an illegal search and seizure. In one way or another they failed to follow the letter of the law, hence the fruits of their efforts are to be treated as non-existent. Perhaps the investigator unlawfully prevented a suspect from entering his apartment to prevent him from disposing of incriminating materials or maybe a police officer opened a suitcase without first having established probable cause. Either way, this represents culpable error. At this, the district attorneys typically express exasperation with the detectives. “What’s wrong with these clowns; don’t they know the law,” is the classic riposte. Sometimes an attorney goes further to inquire into who is teaching these people their business. The point is that someone is expected to school them in the legal niceties. Were police officers left uneducated in the finer points of the law most of their
efforts would go for naught. They might collar criminals, but never convict them. In order to perform their jobs, the police must, therefore, know a great deal about how statutes are written and applied. Ignorance of what is required will not impress the judges who decide these matters.

Police officers are also expected to understand, and respect, the citizens with whom they interact. Were the Irish cops on today’s force to treat only other Irishmen with deference, the subsequent complaints would overwhelm the system. A public servant with roots are on the Emerald Isle is not expected to refer to someone else whose ancestors arrived from southern Italy as a “Dago.” Nor is an officer with Sicilian roots to demean an Italian-American as a “bog-hopper.” In a society routinely characterized as multicultural, even police officers are expected to be aware of cultural differences and to recognize that being different does not diminish the humanity of those they serve. This is especially so with regard to minorities. Legally no longer second-class citizens, persons delegated to enforce the law are required to be sensitive to their rights. This was one of the reasons the Rodney King case became infamous. Had African-Americans not previously been regarded as sub-human, his beating would not have been as offensive. Many millions of viewers concluded that he was, in fact, pummeled as fiercely as he was because truncheon-wielding white cops believed a black man merited this sort of treatment. Ordinary citizens were outraged that he was not perceived as someone due the same respect as people who looked like themselves.

Given our democratic institutions, both in terms of how they are raised and the ways in which they are educated, professional police officers are expected to understand the causes and consequences of the civil rights movement. They need to be aware of the
history of African-Americans, Hispanics, and all others whom society previously 
relegated to an inferior status. Where once it might have been acceptable for those 
wearing a uniform to be parochial in their attitudes, this is no longer permissible. 

Somehow they must learn to be sensitive to citizens dissimilar to themselves. Only this 
will allow them to interpret the circumstances in which others might be embroiled. Were 
they unable to do so, they might construe a normal domestic dispute as a criminal assault. 
Were they incapable of doing so, they could perceive a conventional slur as an instance 
of fighting words. In brief, they must possess the insights needed to distinguish between what has to be controlled and what does not. 

In fact, today’s police officers are far more tolerant and flexible than were their 
antecedents. Despite their critics, they, to a large extent, exhibit the traits expected of 
them. They can even be quite ingenious in adjusting to the idiosyncrasies of an 
unpredictable public. Not long ago I was treated to evidence of this. At Kennesaw State 
University where I teach, Ed Clack, one of our criminal justice professors, joined our 
department after retiring as a Captain from a local police force. In possession of a 
Master’s degree acquired while on the job, he, at the beginning of his career, spent many 
years on the street. One day, while we were discussing the pressures of the job, he 
related this war story. It seems that early one Sunday morning, he received a called from 
a local pancake house. Its proprietor was upset that a customer refused to move a car that 
was blocking several other vehicles. Upon Ed’s arrival he and his partner discovered that 
the “suspect” was well known to them. Manny, as I will call him, had a long history of 
mental illness. Probably suffering from a bi-polar disorder, he could get belligerent when 
not taking his lithium. This day Manny explained that the offending object was not an
automobile, but a space ship. Moreover, the Russians had expressed an interest in inspecting it and ordered him not to move it. Rather than make a fuss, after reviewing the options with a colleague, Ed asked Manny if he would move the ship if they could get permission to do so. When Manny agreed, Ed’s partner ostentatiously walked across the parking lot to a pay phone. Picking up the receiver, he engaged in a loud conversation with the “Russians.” During this he asked for the requisite permission, which was obtained with the supplemental stipulation that the officer move the vehicle. At this, Manny was satisfied and readily agreed to allow the police to drive him home. In the end, no one got hurt or bent out of shape. Quick thinking and cool heads by men who knew their jobs had prevailed.

This sort of professionalism was also on display during the Republican Convention held in New York City after 9/11. Despite tens of thousands of demonstrators determined to create a media-genic incident, even a week’s worth of efforts could not provoke the rough treatment that would have converted them into victims. Not stripping naked, nor hurling insults at the city’s finest, nor attempting to march down streets closed to them, achieved their goal. This was in stark contrast to what happened in Chicago in 1968. At that time, during the height of the Viet Nam War, throngs of protestors were able to incite disorders so violent that sympathetic journalists characterized them as a “police riot.” The result was compassion for agitators who from the start intended to make the authorities look bad. Several decades later the forbearance of a well-trained constabulary was remarkable. Where once being called a “pig” set batons swinging, this time it elicited bemused smiles. Part of the reason for this transformation was a quantum improvement in contingency planning. Long since tutored
in what to expect, both the higher ups and front line officers were mentally prepared for
the experience. This time they approached their task with time-tested strategies and
tactics. No longer surprised by the incivility of their opponents, they could exercise a
personal control that allowed them to implement painfully accumulated expertise. This
same ability to design and execute protective procedures proved invaluable in the wake
of the attack on the Twin Towers. Though a resolute enemy demonstrated a dedication to
seeding terror, they were by and large stymied by police agencies with the intelligence
and suppleness to adjust to novel threats.

Much of this emerging competence can be attributed to the proliferation of
criminal justice training. The length of time, and the intensity of the demands, made of
those preparing to play a part in law enforcement may not be as great as for prospective
physicians, but they are not trivial. Whether through additional schooling or the
standards applied by individual agencies, today’s men and women in uniform or plain
clothes are more professional than ever. While they are rarely as clever as the crime
scene investigators depicted on television, they take justifiable pride in their capabilities.
They know that the hot-tempered or thickheaded are weeded out by the rigors they must
endure. Subjected to innumerable the lessons on police procedure, courtroom practices,
and incarceration methodologies, they typically remember their duty when on the street.
They are also aware of colleagues who lost their jobs because they could not control their
anger. Outsiders continue to look at blue suits and see empty-heads, but personal
experience teaches them otherwise.

Today’s criminal justice programs are replete with courses on race and ethnicity,
social deviance, and research techniques. Those who succeed in passing them learn why
some people break rules and others do not. They likewise enjoy the mental challenge of figuring out how to solve cold cases or profile a criminal’s modus operandi. Not incidentally, they also endure the tedium of deciphering crime statistics. Introduced to theories of criminal behavior and personal psychology, they, in addition, undertake courses in English, history, and science. In short, well educated and conversant with the common culture in which they are embedded, they become more sophisticated human beings. Beyond this, they must demonstrate the internal discipline necessary to complete an extended program of learning. Individuals who are too spontaneous don’t make the cut. Unable to keep appointments, they also liable say the wrong things and/or fail to pass examinations. Long before they validate their emotional dependability in public, it are tested under less critical circumstances.

Police officers may not undergo as rigorous a rite of passage as doctors, but they too are altered in the process of entering their field. As with their more prestigious contemporaries, they come to identify with what they do and take satisfaction in doing it well. In this, they too are on the cutting edge of the future. Sociologists call blue-collar types “semi-professionals,” but they are in the process of becoming more professionalized nevertheless. Like so many others in their social cohort, society delegates them substantial control over what they do because even strangers understand that they can be trusted to proceed competently. More worthy of autonomy than the factory-hands of old, they make communal contributions their ancestors could not—and do so with a freedom their forebears would envy. In this, their expertise and internal motivation pay off for themselves and the millions of ordinary citizens dependent upon them. As such, they participate in a web of mutually interdependent and highly
professionalized occupations. Where once doctors, lawyers, and clergymen stood almost alone, there now exist a multitude of self-reliant specialists who keep vital social machinery humming.

**Private Lives**

As if the occupational transformation of police officers, and doctors before them, was not astonishing enough, professionalism has extended into our private lives. A thoroughgoing expertise, combined with reliable internal motivation, has proven so useful on the job that these qualities are in the process of entering our personal spaces. Individuals who have learned the value of being a professional in the way they make their living are beginning to discover the advantage of developing a “professionalized self.” Why, they ask themselves, should they be skilled in the manufacture of widgets, but incompetent at home? Why spend years acquiring an ability to calculate the tolerances necessary to keep an aircraft aloft, but fail to establish a thriving marriage or raise successful children? Max Weber asserted that modern societies have become more rational. He celebrated an increasing capacity to think things through and act with prudent savoir-faire. These, he concluded, were the foundation of our wealth and well being. Why shouldn’t the same outlook inform our private lives? Should these be less rational?

In looking back, I can, of course, scarcely regard my father as having possessed a professionalized self. He was a man of his time who believed that real work was constituted of muscle and sweat. Intelligent though he was, he was convinced that a worthwhile person got on with the job at hand and did so without preseverating over the details. In his estimation, excessive thought was an excuse for avoiding effort. It was a
sign of laziness, not rationality. How then could he pass along the skills that epitomize a personal professionalism? As my experience with the saw illustrates, he could not. Indeed, his own aspirations were those of an earlier generation. What he wanted from his son, even when he was young, was obedience. Back talk was forbidden—as were questions about how to do what was expected. The goal was to turn out a tough little boy, who would eventually become a tough man. Despite his lack of subtlety, my father wanted the best for me. He intended that I become a success. But this was to be success in blue-collar terms.

Such a man, one who believed in hard work and knowledge acquired through first-hand experience, would not have known where to begin instilling the expertise and internal motivation necessary to become a competent professional. While it is true that if asked he would have described himself as “middle class,” he did not understand that this emerging stratum was increasingly characterized by professionalism. His own was a legacy-world of bosses and those whom they bossed. In his universe, those at the top expected to be obeyed. Although my father resented this imposition, he perceived himself as one of those who needed to comply. Moreover, in his view, his son would one day be in the same situation. I too would need to suck up my bitterness and do as I was told. To move from this vantage point to attitudes characteristic of a professionalized home life was for him a bridge too far. He theoretically wanted his children to become middle class, but he did not recognize, either personally or intellectually, what was needed.

My father did not understand that having a professionalized self was something like being a physician in one’s private life. It would not have occurred to him that a
person could do the equivalent of overcoming his personal problems by acquiring the skills and internal motivation to do so. Instead of being weighed down by stereotyped traditions, or tyrannical authority, such a person would possess the confidence to face life’s uncertainties head on. He or she would attain the emotional maturity and sound judgment to make important decisions without deferring to outside power. Those with professionalized selves were essentially sovereign adults. They were also lifelong learners. Aware that mistakes are possible, they would possess the poise to correct these and the wisdom to know that if they applied themselves they could become successful in their personal activities and intimate relationships.

One of the singular aspects of a professionalized self is a capacity to groom one’s children for a similarly autonomous future. If these adults-to-be are to control their own lives or occupy the sorts of job performed by physicians, they too need to learn how to make independent decisions. Even when they cannot be sure of the correct choice, they have to be able to arrive at sensible judgments and then take responsibility for their ramifications. This capacity, however, is not cultivated by demands for obedience. Children who are constantly ordered about are liable to be too anxious to discover how to think for themselves. More concerned with avoiding punishment than figuring out what to do, they cannot carefully contemplate their options. This is in marked contrast to the situation of youngsters whose parents possess a professionalized self. Their offspring tend to encounter patience as they struggle to acquire unfamiliar skills. Their parents understand that internalized proficiencies take time to master. Able to see things from the child’s point of view, they are prepared to explain things in terms that make sense. They also realize that because the young do not have the abilities or experience of their
elders, they cannot yet reach unguided conclusions. They know that it will take years before they can construct a worldview that allows this. It turns out that those who ultimately become self-directed experts must be conducted, with equanimity, through the many steps that eventuate in personal mastery. Much in the manner of physicians and police officers, they have to go through a process during which they are helped to see what must be seen.

The professionalized self, that is, the individual who applies the lessons of a self-motivated expertise in the workplace to his/her personal situation, needs to be the kind of person who can make crucial decisions. For starters, this means that competent adults have to be competent at selecting an occupation. With so many different types of work from which to choose, each person must light on something that fits his/her disposition and talents. He/she must also opt for a pursuit that allows for success. It will not do to choose something one likes, but where there is no prospect of achievement. The difficulty in arriving at the right endpoint is frequently summed up in today’s nearly universal mantra, to wit, “What will I be when I grow up?” Millions of people struggle with this dilemma as they progress through an educational system that does not present them with clear-cut directions. Most know they will not become farmers (or homemakers) like their great-grandparents, but this does little to narrow their choices. Somehow they must perceive the sorts of person they are and the kinds of niches that are available to them. In this, they have to become experts in understanding themselves and the contemporary occupational landscape.

Overcoming this difficulty does not, of course, conclude life’s challenges. Even while on the job, people must be professionalized in more than the technical aspects of
their work. One of the things that is not taught in engineering school, at least not overtly, is the political acumen to succeed in large organizations. Max Weber taught that rationality extends to careful calculations about an organization’s goals and technologies, but anyone who has been in the workplace learns that this is not always true. Who gets to do what is frequently the result of a complex give-and-take between a multitude of players, most of whom want to vault ahead of their peers. People jockey for position, with some obtaining greater influence than others. Political events matter, hence those who are better at these games tend to accumulate the lion’s share of rewards. They are, in a sense, more professional at the non-professional aspects of their occupations. Experts in assembling and manipulating interpersonal alliances, they become more potent than the competition. In thus demonstrating a personal shrewdness superior to their rivals, they are less apt to be thrown off stride by the uncertainties of a rough pastime.

Moving back to their home situations, those who possess a professionalized self must be skilled in selecting a mate. Nowadays few marriages are arranged. Today potential mates start out as strangers who meet, evaluate each other, and then establish a relationship expected to last a lifetime. The parties know that half of these liaisons dissolve in divorce, but they hope to be an exception. They also hope that theirs will be a fairy tale union of soul mates destined to share love and intimacy forever after. In other words, they want to be happy. Whether this occurs depends on how well they understand themselves, their chosen partner, and the process of creating and maintaining an intimate bond. Individuals, who trust to luck, or the exigencies of romance, are bound to be disappointed. This said, from whence are individuals to develop the resources to be honest with themselves and this special other? For the lucky ones, the requisite self-
awareness and emotional maturity derive for their childhoods. Having been tutored by self-aware parents, who were themselves capable of interpersonal skills, they successfully deal with the inevitable trials of living in close proximity with another human being. They learn how to negotiate deals in which both sides feel like winners. Comfortable in their own skins, they do not feel bound to gather up every resource for themselves. Indeed, they are happy when their partners also come out ahead. The same sorts of consideration apply to close friendships, albeit with less intensity. Friendships based on mutual trust and reciprocal dependence likewise require skill and personal maturity to establish and keep in good repair. They too depend upon being able to share benefits and work out differences; differences that may at first appear intractable, but for which a solution must be found.

All of these abilities, whether at home or on the job, depend on a knack for adjusting to unanticipated circumstances. The problem is that many of us do not grow up in ideal households. Because we have had parents who were not sufficiently professional, we get trapped in ways of life that prevent us from growing into the successes we crave. In learning modes of operation that do not serve us well, we are hindered in doing what is required to be a winner. Even when we realize there must be changes, we find these difficult. Sadly, the way a person is raised can leave scars. Crucial lessons are not learned and emotional equanimity is not achieved. Worse than this, such an upbringing impedes change. Like it or not, those raised in adverse circumstances can become ensnared in an unsuccessful past. Even though they are painfully aware of their mistakes, they keep repeating them. Rigid and impatient, they
lash out in ways that make things worse. What they need, but do not possess, is an expertise in personal change.

Those who would become professionalized in their private lives have to develop an ability to engage in personal growth. They must learn to extricate themselves from the prisons of their youth so as to move on to a more flexible adulthood. One of the great ironies of modernity is that the scientific advances that have contributed so much to economic rationality have limited our understanding of personal change. In an effort to deal with individual unhappiness, private despair has been medicalized. People are told that when they are anxious or depressed, they are suffering from a mental disorder. Their discomfort is said to be comparable to that experienced by schizophrenics and manic-depressives, whereupon they are prescribed medications to make them feel better. What they do not realize is that these interventions slow personal growth. For a while they may make a person feel better, but they do not solve the underlying problems that produce personal anguish. Primarily imposed by dysfunctional social roles, aborted social mobility, and disastrous personal relationships, these aches are better addressed by resocialization. Once people have detected the ways of life that interfere with personal success, these must be relinquished before they can move on to something better. They must accurately perceive the source of their distress; then navigate the mechanisms that provide an improved future.

Resocialization depends primarily upon undergoing a mourning process. Ties with social losses must be severed via a disconcerting period of sadness. Unfortunately, most people prefer not to experience such depths of despair. They would rather cover over their pain and suck up their doubts. This limits their potential, but they believe it the
best they can manage. Nevertheless, those who would be professionalized in their private lives must do better. They have to become expert in how resocialization is achieved and emotionally strong enough to endure it. Almost as counter-productive as the current dominance of the medical model of unhappiness is the negative association between resocialization and personal strength. Most people assume that those who undergo psychotherapy are crazy. They suspect that these persons are mentally defective. The reverse is, in fact, more nearly true. In order to endure the rigors of self-analysis and emotional transformation, people cannot be too vulnerable. They have to possess the resources to deal with distressing realities. In some ways, the route to personal growth is more demanding than is a professional socialization. More intense even than the rigors of a medical internship, it can strike at the heart of a person’s identity.

One last area in which the professionalized self must be competent is morality. This capacity is not strictly personal, but provides a staging ground for individual success. Unless a society is under-girded by an appropriate moral infrastructure, it is unlikely to thrive. Regrettably, but understandably, if it does not flourish, neither can those who rely on it. Human beings are competitive creatures. If they are to cooperate for their mutual benefit, they require rules to curb their excesses. This is the central function of morality. It is a set of standards to which most persons are, and must be, committed. “Don’t lie!” “Don’t steal!” “Don’t murder!” These are the sorts of percepts to which most societies subscribe and to which most of their members adhere. The problem is that there is no absolute constellation of rules upon which everyone agrees. Despite millennia of searching, unanimity has proved elusive. The best efforts of the
most diligent scientists, philosophers, and theologians have been unable to reveal the
perfect formula.

In fact, morality is a process rather than a suite of unalterable rules. It is the
means through which prescriptions are created and enforced. Contrary to what most
moralists assume, its regulations are under constant negotiation. People make demands,
and counter-demands, as they progress toward a fluid consensus about what to expect of
each other. Morality is, in short, a social construction. Yet it is not for that reason
arbitrary. Some so-called relativists seem to believe that it can be manipulated anyway
they want. They imagine that whatever they choose to endorse is, by definition, right for
them. What they fail to appreciate is that no one invents morality. We are all born into
societies that possess a set of informal rules into which we are inducted. These standards
are vague, and often in dispute, but usually compelling enough to provide day-to-day
guidance. We may not know exactly what constitutes a lie, but we get close enough to
satisfy most of what is wanted. In any event, moral rules are always being adjusted to
meet developing circumstances. The current debates about abortion are a convenient
example. One side demands abortion on demand, whereas the other is equally vociferous
in supporting its abolition. Each faction believes that it, and only it, is correct, but in due
course a compromise is usually hammered out. While no individual, or groups of
individuals, can dictate these negotiations, each contributes to their evolution. We all
make demands based on our experience, which, in the fullness of time, influence a
tentative outcome; which, in the case of abortion, may perhaps be that first term abortion
should be legal, but rare.
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Professionalization, it turns out, is contingent upon upholding appropriate standards. There can be no such thing as professional expertise, if nothing is deemed better than anything else. For professionalism to flourish, people must believe in merit and responsibility. They have to defend standards of excellence and a level playing field on which the best can emerge victorious. Think of how absurd it would be if any old quack could be a physician? While there are obvious ambiguities in determining worth, a middle class way of life would be impossible without efforts at fair-minded bargaining about who is best.

By the same token, part of achieving personal growth is aiming at moral growth. People who do not care about being trustworthy are not apt to be trusted. Likewise, if they are unabashedly childish, they will be treated as children. Still, there is an irony involved here. Tolerance is essential in a multicultural society, but compete tolerance is tantamount to an absence of standards. Unless those who believe in supporting expertise and internal motivation exhibit the moral courage to defend competence, they will ultimately be at the mercy of incompetents.

A defense of interpersonal freedom is also imperative. Refusing to allow people control over their own lives would convert them into ineffectual drones. Personal responsibility would vanish and with it the opportunity to be professionalized. Freedom, that is, the ability to make individual decisions, must be one of the central values of a middle class society lest their be no occasion to specialize in independent decisions. Physicians, police officers, or even nursery school teachers forced to follow orders slavishly would soon turn into surly slaves. As such, they would neither be happy nor proficient at what they do.
As our world becomes more complicated, my father’s ideal of obedience to authority grows more obsolete by the hour. There is today too much to know for a centralized group of authorities to control all of our social arrangements. The responsibility for our combined security, therefore, rests upon a growing number of shoulders. This includes the private as well as the public domain. Only an informed and steadfast population can accomplish the widely separated chores that require doing. Only when large numbers of persons possess the requisite abilities can all of us rest assured. Many more of us must, therefore, develop these capacities. Professionalism, including personal professionalism, is no longer a luxury. Our survival, as well as our happiness, depends on it. The difficulty is in achieving this. Never before, not in all of recorded history, has so much been required of so many. Rarely before has so great a social transformation rested on the efforts of millions, so many of whom are unprepared for the task. My father was not alone. His attachment to the old ways was the norm for his generation and a legacy of my own. Breaking free is, consequently, a challenge. In what follows, we examine what has changed and how this transformation can be handled. What must ordinary people do if they wish to be successful in a middle class society? And what must society become if it is to foster our separate and collective ambitions?

Becoming personally professionalized is not easy. Success in a middle class world is not preordained. First, it is necessary to understand what it means to be middle class. Those who do not know where they are headed are apt to get lost. Second, it is essential to understand what goes into being professional. It is one thing to recognize that it entails a self-motivated expertise; it is quite another to recognize the specific sorts of expertise required or what it means to be self-motivated. Then there is the problem of
actually doing what needs to be done. An intellectual appreciation of what is involved is inadequate. Those who do not know how to climb a mountain are unlikely to reach the peak, no matter how articulately they can describe the journey.
MR. BROOKS’ NEIGHBORHOOD

There were trees on my block. All up and down my end of Eighth Street, Norway maples shaded the sidewalk. A bit farther down most of the trees were sycamores, while around the corner was a copse of cottonwoods. Unlike my grandparent’s street, few of the dwellings were stand-alone houses. Mine was very much a city neighborhood. On our side of the street most of the structures were four or six apartment buildings attached to others exactly like them. At the far end of the block there was a real apartment house, but I never ventured there except for piano lessons. Across the street was a row of private houses, some of which were semi-attached, but most were fully attached—what would today be called town houses. My family’s quarters were different. We lived in a two and a half room apartment over a grocery store. There was a two-bedroom flat across the hall, but otherwise we were alone.

When I was small, the man I knew as fat Maxie ran the grocery below us. Though unmarried, he was always pleasant, even allowing us children to play with his delivery wagon. Why he left, I never discovered. Soon, Joe the grocery store man took his place. Joe was not nearly as nice. He would yell at us when we blocked his front door. Although he and his family lived down the block, and his daughter Bernice was a valued playmate, he never seemed to let down his gruff exterior. Across from our house, also near the corner, was Joe the shoemaker’s tiny establishment. He was an Italian immigrant whose broken English could be a challenge. Always friendly to us youngsters,
he would occasionally invite us in to play with the tools of his trade. I loved to sit on his shoe shining chair pretending to be a customer. Nevertheless my sister was his favorite. Only later did I realize why. She apparently reminded him of a daughter he had left behind in Italy. I learned this after being allowed on the other side of the curtain that separated the front of his store from the back where he lived. Sparsely furnished with a cot, a chest of draws, a chair, and a hot plate, the place of honor was reserved for two framed pictures. One of these was a wedding picture; the other was of his children, standing nervously, but proudly in their best clothes.

Next to Joe’s place was a tailor shop operated by people we never got to know. On the other side, squarely on the corner, was the candy store we children frequented. It was run by the uncle of one of my friends and always beckoned with ice cream cones, candy bars, and “egg creams.” The latter was a tasty concoction made with chocolate syrup, carbonated water, and milk. Around the corner were an upholstery and butcher shop. On my side of the street stood a vegetable stand and around from it was a bakery. The bakery was where I was sent to buy rye bread and water bagels. Once in a while I was allowed to purchase a Charlotte Russ. In later years, the bakery would close, while the vegetable store would be converted into an addressograph where I would get one of my first jobs.

None of these places interfered with our play. When we children were small our repertoire consisted of Cowboys and Indians, hopscotch, and the like. As we got older, the boys transferred their allegiance to stickball, touch football, and arguments about professional sports teams. Most of us were Dodger fans, but every now and then someone would express a preference for Mickey Mantle or Willie Mays, over Duke
Snyder. The girls busied themselves sitting on the stoops gossiping about whatever girls gossiped about. Sometimes they played stoopball, but more often it was jump rope or something with a bouncing ball accompanied by rhymes such as “‘A’ my name is Alice.” Although half of us were Jewish and the other half Italian, this never made difference to our friendships. On summer days, because no one had air conditioning, we spent evenings sitting in the street on folding chairs. Close at hand would be a glass of lemonade that would often have to wait as we sprang up to chase fireflies. There was a rumor that back in the old days the neighborhood had come together for block parties, but this was before my time.

The world of our parents was another matter. Few of them socialized together, although my mother had a few girl friends with whom she chewed the fat and played mahjong. What the fathers did, I rarely knew. One was a cab driver, another worked at his family’s oil delivery business, and a third owned a gas station. The latter had a son who owned a motorcycle and wore a black leather jacket. We left him alone, because as everyone understood, he was a “hood” (which is to say, a hoodlum). My best friend’s father ran a series of game stalls down at Coney Island. When summer came he became a Barker who enticed passersby to part with their money by throwing baseballs into glass jars. Years later, when I was in high school, he would employ me, but I was never very good at the job.

Growing up in this cozy little universe, there seemed little beyond it. My family occupied extremely crowded accommodations, but this felt normal. There were eventually five of us, which required my father to be ingenious. In time, he divided the bedroom in half with a wooden partition. On one side slept my sister, while on the other
my bother and I shared a trundle bed. My parents slept in the living room on a fold away

couch. Meanwhile the kitchen was so tiny that the refrigerator, when we got one, sat in a
corner of the living room cum dining area. Even though I knew other families occupied
more space and that the children on television had separate bedrooms, like so many
people who grow up in straightened circumstances, I never felt poor. There was always
food on the table, clothes on my back, and a dry roof overhead. Ours was not a fairytale
existence, what with my father chasing me about, threatening to teach me a lesson, but
neither was it the equivalent of a Dickensian workhouse.

By the time I became a teenager, my parents were talking about moving out to the
suburbs. On the weekends, we routinely drove out to Long Island to engage in house
hunting, but nothing ever came of this. From my perspective, suburban life was an
unattainable dream. It was a place of opulent dwellings and neatly manicured lawns. It
even boasted backyards where you could cavort on real grass. David Brooks, in On
Paradise Drive, later depicted what I missed. Writing at the turn of a new century, he
regaled readers with an imaginary tour of the rapidly spreading exurbs. Half way through
this account, he arrives at what he calls the suburban core, that is, the traditional suburbs
to which my family aspired. These, in his view, are indeed distinguished by being neat,
clean, and well ordered. “Generations have come and gone, individuals have lived and
died, and yet these neighborhoods still carry the whiff of Eisenhower America. The
Oldsmobiles have been replaced with PT Cruisers. Chuck Berry is out and Eminem is in.
The brick ramblers now have second story additions, but the lawns look the same.” That
is to say, they are painstakingly mowed and watered.
In his attempt to characterize these places Brooks alludes to the game of golf. This is his parable for the preferred lifestyle of traditional suburbanites. As he explains, “In the ideal world as defined by golf, everything is immaculate. The fairways are weedless stretches of soft perfection. The greens are rolling ponds of manicured order. The sand traps are raked smooth…. Even the people are neat; everybody is dressed casually but nicely.” According to Brooks “the modern suburb enshrines the pursuit of par. It is not a social order oriented around creativity, novelty or excitement. The suburban knight strives to have his life together, to achieve mastery over the great dragons: tension, hurry, anxiety, and disorder.” If he succeeds in this, he can “spend [his] days in perfect equanimity. [He radiates] confidence and calm. Compared to [him] Dick Cheney is bipolar. [He] may not be the most intellectual or philosophical person on the planet, but [he is] honest and straightforward, friendly and good-hearted.” For Books, the traditional suburbs are an oasis of stability.

Down the road from these one time tract homes, Brooks encounters the exurbs. These are the more contemporary suburbs, and nowadays the fastest growing ones. They are a jumble of modern houses, heavily trafficked malls, and omni-present tennis courts. As Brooks reports, seventy-three million souls were transported across state lines and into them during the 1990s alone. They moved to “these centerless places in search of the things people have always sought in a home: extra counter space in the kitchen, abundant storage space in the basement, and plenty of closets.” He further explains that “the outer suburbs have very few poor people, and relatively few rich people. While many of the successful people in the inner-ring suburbs are professionals—doctors,
lawyers, professors, and journalists—many of the people in the outer-ring suburbs are managers in marketing, sales, execution, and planning.”

Brooks thinks of the people who have moved into the exurbs as infused with “conservative utopianism.” As judged by the 2004 election, many voted for George W. Bush and, like their president, think of themselves as compassionate conservatives. Moreover, says Brooks, “the exurbs are built to embody a modern vision of the suburban ideal. Demographic studies show that they look like 1950s suburban America—intact two-parent families, 2.3 kids, low crime, and relatively low divorce rates. You sometimes get the impression that these people have fled their crowded and stratified old suburbs because they really want to live in an updated Mayberry with Blackberries.” Once there, they revel in activities such as backyard grilling on the most modern equipment Home Depot or Lowe’s can supply. The ideal is family togetherness as punctuated by soccer games, hordes of teenage drivers, and post Thanksgiving trips to the mall; a togetherness that would not be completely alien to Ozzie and Harriet and their kids.

I, in fact, live in such an exurb. Safely ensconced north of Atlanta in Georgia’s Cherokee County, I have come a long way from Brooklyn. In my version of Mr. Brooks’ neighborhood most people live in neatly delineated “developments” of stand-alone houses, surrounded by upwards of a quarter of an acre of land. My own home has a mixed stand of hardwoods and Southern pines in the backyard and grass out front. Like most of my neighbors, I also boast a rustic back deck overlooking scads of azaleas and dogwoods. When I first moved into the suburbs, in Rochester, New York, I thought I had moved into a park. Far from the concrete canyons of Manhattan, where I once resided,
they shimerred with wildlife and greenery. Subsequently, after I moved to Georgia, my morning walk passed gurgling streams, ponds crowded with ducks and geese, and horse farms featuring diminutive herds of miniature donkeys. On good days, I could follow the doings of rabbits and chipmunks, and upon occasion the spectacle of a hawk chasing down a squirrel. Then, of course, there were the children. In the morning I encountered them as they waited to catch the school bus. In the afternoon, the younger ones played in the cul-de-sac in front of my house. When I moved into this residence, the tarmac was filled by teenagers playing football, one of whom subsequently went on to become an offensive lineman for Florida State University. A few years later, after a turnover of residents, the children were preschoolers riding bikes and electric cars. Now where I live, the kids carry towels as they amble off to the swimming pool or howl when they play on the development’s basketball court.

More than anything else, I rejoice in the extra space. Today my living room is bigger than the entire apartment in which I grew up. I even have a home office—in which I am presently typing these words. Immediately around me are sufficient shelves to accommodate the thousands of books I have accumulated over the years. Across the hall, adjacent to our master bedroom, is a bathroom with a walk-in closet and a bathtub framed by a stained glass window overlooking the backyard. Downstairs, there is a fireplace and around the side of the house sit three air conditioners that easily cool the whole place. At times such as this, when I reflect upon my good fortune, I think about my grandfather. After he gave up his contracting business, he retired to a neat little house in south Florida. Addicted to fishing in the local canals, he would return home to write those of us left behind in New York. In these missives, he would regale us with stories of
his latest activities. When he came to the end, he always concluded the same way. “And this is how we suffer in Florida.” Today I can say the same about Georgia. It may not be perfect, but it is as close to utopia as I have come.

And yet, I am told that I have this all wrong. For the last several years my department at Kennesaw State University has sponsored an annual conference on the suburbs. During these symposiums we invite academics, developers, politicians, and laypersons to contemplate an array of suburban problems. There are apparently many such problems. Not the least of these is suburban sprawl. As a sociologist, I repeatedly hear colleagues bemoan the mindless conformity surrounding us. People, they tell me, have become soulless materialists, more intent on keeping up with the Joneses than with what really matters. The academic ideal is a return to the urban togetherness of yesteryear. This would cure suburbanites who take up too much space in their pseudo-pastoral bastions. If only they returned to their roots, they would be more fulfilled. Once out of their automobiles and onto the streets, they would rediscover other people and, in the process, what it is to be human.

The patron saint of these would-be reformers is Jane Jacobs. Her depictions of long ago urban life resonate in their ears. According to Jacobs, the old style city street was home to a large and loving family. Much akin to the villages Hillary Clinton has claimed necessary for raising a child, it embraced its young in a cocoon of warmth and sustenance. With apartments and storefronts sitting check by jowl, a multitude of concerned parents and storekeepers could be counted upon to supervise, and mentor, each other’s offspring. They would notice when someone did something wrong, then say something about it. Moreover, no one needed to brood alone in totally separate houses.
With a myriad of other human beings close at hand, there was always someone who cared. Because this urban village was their own, they cherished it and those who also belonged to it. Not yet hobbled by an antiseptic materialism, they concentrated on their shared humanity. What is more, they thrived on it.

All of this sounds wonderful. It is an ideal to which few object. The trouble is that I used to live in one of these neighborhoods and I know this portrayal is overdrawn. Back on Eighth Street, I was indeed looked after by shopkeepers and neighborhood moms, but there were also bullies who chased me down. What's more, Joe the shoemaker may have been a loving presence, but Joe the grocery owner was not. Nor did my friend’s parents care about my future. Whether or not I attended college was immaterial to them. True, the cozy apartment in which I was raised did not destroy my spirit, but neither did it elevate it. It was simply where I lived. The acquisitiveness of the modern suburb does not bring universal happiness, but neither did the relative deprivation of the inner city. My father’s insistence on obedience was surely not superior to the permissiveness of contemporary parents.

Ironically today’s suburbs are not the strongholds of lonely materialism they are made out to be. They may be storehouses of wealth and conspicuous consumption, but that is not their essence. The suburbs are, in fact, middle class utopias. Designed for the middle classes, by the middle classes, they more approximately fulfill their needs than any pervious residential pattern. Although many non-middle class types have migrated to their precincts, it is because they too aspire to middle class comfort. Why this form of life has become so attractive is an interesting story. But to understand it one must recognize who belongs to the middle class. As the custodians of the first truly middle
class society in the history of the world, their lifestyle features accommodations unlike those of their ancestors. To comprehend its essentials, we must begin by exploring what it means to be middle class. It turns out to entail far more than a fancy house, a large car, or a fat back account.

**Thanksgiving Day**

Once upon a time the world was chock-a-block with farmers and craftsmen. In colonial America, to cite our history, most people worked the land, while a smaller number clustered in coastal cities dominated by merchants. Plowing his fields, pulling tree stumps, and harvesting crops occupied the average man’s days. Although expert in maintaining his tools and residence, he was largely a jack-of-all-trades and master of few. Were he in town, he might be a candlestick maker or a blacksmith, but in this case too his time would be devoted to what nowadays would seem monotonous tasks. Dipping wicks into tallow, day after day, would strike most of us as a less than stimulating. How different things have become. Ours is a world permeated with a myriad of different jobs, many of which are enormously complex. No longer is the choice between butcher, baker, and candlestick maker. No longer does repetitively grinding wheat at the mill, or driving a team of recalcitrant horses, dominate our sun up to sun down.

A recent Thanksgiving dinner drove home to me what has happened. Like many families, ours makes a tradition of gathering together to mark our good fortune. In the last few years, many of these celebrations have been held at my brother’s central Florida house. Since he prides himself on laying out an elaborate spread, we all enjoy his hospitality and good cheer. Where once our mother would bake a turkey, he now bakes a bigger bird, to which he adds a glazed ham. But this is not all. When our mother grew
too old to prepare her time-honored matzo-meal stuffing, he made sure to get the recipe, but then he appended two other kinds of dressing. He also cooks up two kinds of cranberry sauce, a string bean casserole topped with French fried onions, garlic mashed potatoes, candied yams, and sweet potatoes topped with marshmallows. As if this were not enough, his daughter and her friend bake a caramel cake, a neighbor brings a Middle Eastern salad, and a sister-in-law prepares a batch of rice crispy treats. One year my brother forgot to bake his usual cinnamon apples, for which he profusely apologized. None of us minded, because we were too full to notice. No wonder this feast attracts a crowd. No wonder we zone out on triptophan.

Among those at a past year’s get-together were, naturally, my brother and his wife. He is a lawyer who runs a practice profitable enough to hire several associates. His wife is a certified public accountant formerly employed in a managerial capacity by a major hotel chain. The year I will discuss her father managed to come. He is a retired airline pilot who began his career as a ground attack pilot for the navy. His present wife, a flight attendant, was at his side. My sister-in-law’s sister had likewise come down from Maine. She is a part-time school lunch-lady, whose husband is a commercial fisherman. Also at the table were my sister-in-law’s cousin and his family. He is a salesman for an electronic equipment company, while his wife was occupied in raising their three-year-old son. In previous years, her parents had also come. They are immigrants from Cuba, with her father still working at a small factory in Miami. Likewise present were the parents of my niece’s best friend, as well as their other daughter and her boyfriend. They are immigrants from Lebanon. He is a mechanical engineer, while his eldest daughter was then a college student. Finally, I must add my mother, who was once employed as a
clerk by the U.S. passport office. Not present were my sister and her family. She worked for many years as an interior designer at a major corporation and is now freelancing as a sculptor. Her husband, though currently retired, was a psychologist/administrator for the state of New York. One of their daughters has worked for a publishing house, while the other is attempting to establish herself as an artist.

It struck me as I sought a means of illustrating what has happened to the contemporary occupational division of labor that there are few better examples than was provided by those congregated around my brother’s feast. Almost everyone had a different job, many of which were of professional caliber. Also of interest was that almost none of us had these jobs in mind when we were young. We did not contemplate them in grammar school, nor prepare for them in Junior High. My first choice had been cowboy, followed by rabbi, and then physicist. My brother actually began his career installing vinyl flooring. His wife, in her turn, held a series of unrelated jobs before returning to school to get her masters degree in accounting. None of us, not a single person in the dining room, grew up in a professional household. Each of us learned what it was to become professional through a process of trial and error.

First, we all had to decide upon an occupational direction. Unfortunately, given the panorama from which we had to select, none of us could comprehend the full range of possibilities, never mind what these entailed. To get some idea of the extent of today’s vocational choices, all one need do is consult the Department of Labor’s Dictionary of Occupational Titles. Literally the size of a phone book, it contains hundreds of thousands of distinct positions. An even better idea of how elaborate and sophisticated many of these jobs are can be obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistic’s National Occupational
and Wage Estimates. It breaks down occupations into a series of categories that include managerial jobs, business and financial occupations, computer and mathematical tasks, architecture and engineering careers, life, psychical, and social science jobs, community and social services employments, legal undertakings, education, training, and library positions, arts, design, entertainment, sports, and media slots, healthcare practitioners, protective service occupations, food preparation and serving jobs, various maintenance employments, personal care and service jobs, sales and related occupations, office and administrative support staff, farmers, fishers, and forestry workers, construction and extraction occupations, production workers, and transportation and material moving tasks. This is quite a mouthful, but each of these is further broken down into more detailed categories. Many, as should be apparent, are middle class jobs. They are either professions or quasi-professions. This is clearly true for doctors, lawyers, and college professors, but also for architects, business managers, and computer programmers. A closer inspection reveals that many historically blue-collar jobs are also professionalizing. They have become more like other middle class jobs with nurses specializing as audiologists or radiation technicians, or social workers concentrating on mental health or rehabilitation services. Even ostensibly blue-collar categories such as transportation and material handling include respected occupations such as commercial pilot, air traffic controller and flight engineer.

Considering this vocational smorgasbord, the business of choosing what to do in life is no simple matter. Not only is it impossible, as children, to grasp the scope of what is available, but we can scarcely be certain of which option will suit our later abilities and interests. Unfamiliar both with what these entail and the kinds of adults we will one day
become, we cannot determine what will eventually fit. Nevertheless we have to decide, and decide I, and those present, for our Thanksgiving dinner did. Step by step we refined our understanding both of adult employments and our personal capabilities. Some of our decisions were poorly conceived and had to be reconsidered, but ultimately we landed in comfortable places. In my own case, I had been a cabdriver, a market researcher, a newspaper reporter, a methadone counselor, and a welfare caseworker, before alighting on sociology and college teaching. Each of these opened my eyes to corners of the world I had not previously known and aspects of my character of which I had been oblivious. In any event, it is amidst this sort of disorder that each of us was forced to test untried social roles.

For many, the jobs we entered turned out to be complex. Although not contemplated when we were young, they entailed hard-won skills and cutting edge knowledge. My brother had to go to night school to finish his bachelor’s degree before moving on to law school. No one helped him, not even me. I was too busy scratching my own way through a higher education to be of much service. His wife’s father got were he was, first by going to Annapolis, then dropping out at the behest of his first wife, after which, upon completing his undergraduate degree, he returned to the navy for training as an aircraft carrier pilot, where he incidentally served two tours of duty in Viet Nam. Part of what these educations instilled were technical skills. Professionals, it must be remembered, are supposed to be experts. As such, they must find a means of acquiring their expertise. Typically this requires a formal learning process, but this socialization may also be less official. When it works, the learner comes to identify with these proficiencies. He or she takes pride in being able to do what most others cannot.
This happened to me after I acquired a Ph.D., to my brother after he passed the bar, to his wife once she was certified as an accountant, and to her father upon attaining the status of a naval pilot. None of us was originally certain we would succeed, hence when we did, we were gratified; so gratified that it changed our self-images; so gratified that these newly acquired skills became a source of personal pleasure.

One of the odd things about attaining a professionalized status is that it alters not just one’s vocation, but one’s avocations. People who take satisfaction in what they do for a living often do something similar for fun. Once upon a time, military men not only rode horses while performing as cavalry officers, they also delighted in racing steeds to see whose was fastest. Today’s professionals also take sufficient pride in the tools of their trade to convert them into off-duty toys. This became clear the day before our thanksgiving dinner. Several of us were sitting around a restaurant table when my sister-in-law’s father raised the subject of geo-caching. This was greeted by expressions of glee by several present. Soon the conversation turned to an activity of which I had been completely unaware. Apparently many thousands of people engage in what amounts to a high-tech scavenger hunt. Using hand held geo-positioning systems, they fan out in quest of items hidden by others also aided by GPS equipment. Having been alerted to these “caches” by Internet bulletin boards, they relish discovering their locations, then leaving evidence of their victories. As I listened to excited accounts of surprising discoveries made in odd places, I detected a gratification in their technical achievements. All were pleased to be familiar with a satellite-based technology, computer skills, and world-hopping travels. It also occurred to me that this was a hobby fit for a retired airline pilot. It clearly took advantage of cockpit technologies, as well as better than average physical
mobility. My brother was attracted to this same pursuit partly because his affluence allowed him to travel and partly because, as a licensed civil pilot, he too took pleasure in knowing how to utilize a geo-positioning system.

Even the salesman in our midst took satisfaction in his technical skills. During a drive to deliver the women to the local mall for a post-Thanksgiving shopping expedition, the conversation gravitated to LCD traffic lights. He had been involved in marketing these and explained the difficulties involved in doing so. To begin with, he talked about the technical details of switching from traditional bulbs to something more reliable. Then he appraised the costs incurred and the difficulties municipalities had in obtaining the requisite funding. This quickly led to a discussion of the politics of local taxation. What were politicians required to do before letting out a contract to his company? The specifics were fascinating. At no point was anyone in the SUV bored. For all of us, this was recreational talk. Though only the salesman was obliged to solve these problems, the rest of us were treated to a mental challenge. It was as if we were engaged in a sporting event where the prize went to the person demonstrating the greatest intellectual dexterity. Actually, we were more like teammates seeking a collaborative victory over an obdurate puzzle.

Such conversations may seem bizarre to those unfamiliar with middle class activities. Discussions about the politics of bureaucratic organizations can be deadly dull for those who have not had to navigate their treacherous shoals. From the outside they can seem like the dull pursuits of dull functionaries. When, however, one’s job necessitates devising a strategy for getting around a vindictive boss, nothing is more fascinating. The same applies to comprehending the differences between people coming
from diverse social backgrounds. Their assorted cultural and personal histories may be mildly interesting while they remain strangers. But once they become employees who must be motivated to complete a project, what makes them tick becomes intriguing. Men are not supposed to enjoy gossip about such matters. They are supposedly to be more job-oriented. Nevertheless, when in the midst of corporate negotiations, they must examine the origins of their colleagues to determine how their motives might shape their demands. The approach they take is rather like the one they are apt to demonstrate when shopping. Unlike women, who tend to linger over these matters, men get straight down to business. They decide what they want, do some problem-solving about the best deal, make a choice, purchase the item, then move on. For them, attempting to understand their colleagues is not an end in itself; it is a human relations puzzle. They want to get things right, not because they enjoy touchy-feely interactions, but because they intend to be competent in their interpersonal activities.

Years ago a popular television comedian (Jose Jimenez) drew laughs by proclaiming that whatever he was asked to do was “not my job.” No matter what the task, he begged off by hiding behind the supposed boundaries of his occupational specialty. Today’s middle class professionals are not as circumscribed. The occupations they perform are too complicated to be as readily defined. Both on a human and technological level, they must be prepared for surprises. Often the solution to a problem they are assigned can only be determined by crossing industrial borders. A contemporary cliché has it that one should learn to “think outside the box.” Initiative and ingenuity, not stereotyped conformity, are celebrated. Nor does expanding one’s horizons seem at odds with respecting the vocational territory of one’s colleagues. It is understood that jobs
need to be coordinated. To be competent, one must not only understand one’s own responsibilities, but something of the responsibilities of the others with whom one must cooperate. The modern middle class is no place for old-fashioned xenophobia, whether between nations or job performances.

**Defining the Middle Class**

A few years ago, one of my students organized a panel discussion on the black middle class. Her first question, the one she intended to pose the panelists, was: What is the middle class? Then, secondarily, she asked: Who belongs to it? She assumed, as did most of those she queried, that this could be defined in terms of income. If you earned enough, you were obviously middle class. If you did not, you weren’t. The question was whether the cut-off was $25,000, or $50,000, or $75,000. If you could afford a big house and a big car, you had certainly arrived. On the other hand, if you were stuck renting a modest apartment because you did not have enough cash for a down payment on a residence of your own, you clearly had not. What neither she, nor most of the discussants, appreciated was that being middle class is more about a way of life than a bank account. Becoming a member of this stratum has more to do with the type of work one does and the way one spends one’s personal time, than with dollars and cents. Some individuals who are extremely rich are, in fact, working class people with money. A Mike Tyson, at the height of his fame and fortune, could barely qualify as anything better than lower class. College professors, however, are notoriously ill paid; yet emblematic of middle class standing.

Members of the middle class have become society’s designated planners, organizers, and leaders. They are specialists in decentralized self-direction. Karl Marx
dismissed the middling workers of his day as parasites. In his view, they were leeches who drew sustenance from the genuine wealth producers, the proletarians. He believed that value was created by labor; hence those who worked with their hands to generate material goods were the source of social affluence. The capitalists and their middle class acolytes merely skimmed off the surplus produced by the efforts of these others. They got to live more opulently than the hourly employees who were only paid enough to survive; an act of blatant thievery if there ever was one and an injustice that screamed out to be undone. What Marx completely misunderstood is that planning, organizing, and supervising are as essential to commercial and industrial efficiency as muscle power. If anything, they are more so. Nowadays, as productivity is rising to levels that old-line communists never contemplated, it is understood that improvements depend, not on working harder, but smarter. Finding better ways to exert ourselves and coordinate our efforts have a multiplying effect that sweat equity cannot match. Physical motion is wasted if it is not aimed in the right direction, at the right moment, with the correct impact.

The people in charge of this brainpower are, of course, middle class types. They are largely professionals, middle managers, and successful entrepreneurs. Lately semi-professionals have been joining the party. Each of these is, in its separate way, a category of decentralized authority. They all specialize in making decisions and exercising power, but do so, not at the top of the social pecking order, but someplace closer to the middle. Nevertheless, those occupying these positions are delegated discretion over significant social activities. As such, they must themselves be self-directed individuals capable of making competent choices—even in environments of
uncertainty. Although they do not always know the best answers, they are supposed to possess the skills to ferret these out. They are also expected to possess the confidence to make responsible choices. Whatever their personal insecurities, they are required to maintain the equanimity to think clearly. This means that they must be self-controlled, self-disciplined, and social-minded. With their own fates, as well as the fates of those they lead, in their hands, they cannot be impulsive egoists. They must be aware of the consequences of their actions and strive to make them useful.

Consider the role of the traditional professionals; for arguments sake let us say attorneys. When a client hires a lawyer to help settle a legal problem, he expects to receive expert and principled assistance. The attorney is counted on to understand the law, and how to argue it, as well as to operate in the interest of the client. Unlike the second chair in the movie My Cousin Vinnie, he cannot be someone so intimidated by the mechanics of the courtroom that he can barely stammer out questions for the witnesses. Competent lawyers think of their feet. They plan their strategies before entering the arena—often meticulously so—but when on stage, articulate persuasive arguments despite the pressures of public display. They do not need to consult a supervisor before responding to a judge’s query. Presumably possessed of a keen intelligence and a broad familiarity with the local statues and courtroom procedures, they are capable of making appropriate choices on the spot. Intent on winning, they do not toss off ill-conceived responses merely because these cross their minds. To the contrary, they analyze what they say with an eye to its effect. Although like most humans, they may be distressed by the prospect of losing, they cannot allow their emotions to overwhelm their professional judgment.
Middle managers too have major responsibilities. Unlike machine operators, their options are not limited by the mechanical devices they oversee or the production quotas they are required to meet. As organizational leaders, they are asked to extract specific contributions from their subordinates. No longer tasked with the close supervision their predecessors once exercised, they must instead be front-line psychologists. They have to figure out what to say in order to solicit cooperative effort from a diverse group of workers—generally without advice from above. As a result, they too must be independent thinkers who possess the confidence to innovate. When assigned a project, they cannot depend on explicit instructions regarding how to proceed. Rather, they must possess the knowledge and temperament to carry on by themselves. Frequently provided with an objective, rather than detailed directions on how to achieve it, they must figure out what needs to be done and then implement a schedule that indicates who will work with whom, in what manner. This entails the foresight to put countless details together so that they dovetail in the desired manner. In short, middle managers too must be self-directed individuals who perform as expected because they are personally dedicated to doing so. They may not be the supreme commanders of their armies, but must lead their individual battalions to victory in a host of lesser skirmishes.

This brings us to the entrepreneurs. Although there is something peculiar in saying so, they too are becoming professionalized members of the middle class. A far cry from the bloated capitalists of Karl Marx’s imagination, they are quintessential risk-takers. As independent sources of commercial ideas, they approach their tasks with less direction than middle managers. As their own bosses, there is no one above them to provide a reassuring road map. Moreover, in initiating their own projects, they are liable
to place their personal resources in jeopardy. In order to get projects off the ground, they may have to invest their own money to acquire the requisite machinery or underlings. They do not have to be geniuses, but they clearly need a superior overview of these affairs. This includes the necessary technical expertise, but also the people skills to organize an enterprise, often from scratch. In addition, they must possess sufficient insights into market conditions to know what will sell. They too, in other words, must be capable of self-motivation and self-direction. Were they simply bloated coupon clippers or self indulgent jet setters, they would be incapable of creating the myriad of small (and sometimes large) businesses upon which the health of a market-based economy depends.

Semi-professionals, as we have seen, are also moving in comparable directions. Their authority may not be as great, nor their responsibilities as significant, but they too think on their feet. Not just doctors, but nurses; not just lawyers, but police officers; not just business leaders; but social workers, have to be capable of intelligent self-control. They too must be well informed and emotionally mature if they are to make decisions that benefit those over whom they exercise power. Many semi-professionals are also well paid. They too own suburban houses surrounded by manicured lawns, but this is not what has changed their approach to life. It is the exercise of discretion that altered who they are, what they do, and how they think about themselves. More often operating as their own bosses than did old-time factory workers, they may have blue-collar origins, but they cannot afford a traditional blue-collar mentality. They too have to be self-directed, which affects what they think important and even enjoy.

Left to their own devices, members of the new middle class also become more professionalized in their daily lives. Generally masters of increased leisure time, they
need to coordinate this as well. It has long been said that a man’s home is his castle, but nowadays this is more apt to be true than ever. The lords of contemporary suburban McMansions get to decide how to landscape their quarter acres, what style of furniture will decorate their living rooms, and how to spend the Memorial Day weekend. They likewise get to choose their friends, the movies they view, and the hobbies they pursue. Able also to select their own religions, political affiliations, and favorite restaurants, they not only feel free; they are free. Sometimes they may not be sure of their preferences; sometimes they cannot decide where to go on vacation, whom to marry, or what occupation to enter, but they would not swap these quandaries for the security of a renewed serfdom. Proud to be members of the middle class, if not always sure what this entails, they occasionally confuse the trappings of their status with the decision-making latitude at its core. Nevertheless, they do make private decisions, and make them with mounting competence.

Planning

Obviously I write books. If you are reading this, I have clearly managed to get this manuscript into the public arena. But it is not my first book. And because it is not, I often encounter people who solicit advice about writing books. Sometimes it seems as if almost everyone thinks of him/herself as a potential author. Most rightly believe that they have a story worth telling, that is, if they can just figure out how to tell it. More usually, the process intimidates them. Occasionally they have written a few pages, but never get beyond the beginning of the beginning. When they pick up an empty pad or sit down in front of a blank computer screen, they are consumed with doubts. The prospect of an entire book is overwhelming. There is so much that needs to be said that there
Middle Class World seems to be no way of putting all the pieces together. Worse yet, whatever makes it from their imagination to paper seems inadequate. It is nowhere near the poetic prose that in moments of reverie seems on the tip of their tongues. In the end, most people give up. They continue to have fantasies about what they will eventually write, but they never get there.

What they are running into is the difficulty in planning. The larger and more complex the project, the more problematic it is to organize. Middle class activities are rarely like paint-by-the-numbers pictures. The things that need doing do not come in shrink-wrapped boxes complete with pre-stenciled canvasses and the appropriate brushes and pigments. Often what needs to be done has never been done before—at least not in precisely the same way. Mid-level social leaders, like most leaders, are frequently presented with an objective, a partial inventory of resources, and the mandate to proceed. It is then up to them to figure out how. They also find that the less structure coming from above, the greater the need to fill in the blanks. How then to move forward? This can be a challenge. If the answers are not obvious, a person must know where to look for them. New information may have to be learned, innovative patterns of action tested, and feedback from the real world assessed to determine if things are working out as desired. All of this takes more courage than is commonly assumed. Things can, and do, go wrong and the person in charge, especially if he/she has exercised initiative, can be blamed for failure.

Let me start with a small example. A few years ago I was required to write the syllabus for a course on social change and modernization I was scheduled to teach in the fall. The subject was one I had taught before, but never very successfully. For a few
years, a colleague took over, but what he emphasized was quite different from what I did. In the past, I had concentrated on issues such as Francis Fukuyama’s “the great disruption” or “personal resocialization,” but neither captured my students’ imagination. At one point, I merely followed the plan suggested by a popular textbook, yet because I disagreed with the author I was uncomfortable with this approach. Ultimately, I decided that I shouldn’t teach the course at all. Then I got interested in the middle class revolution. This led to writing a book on the subject and quite naturally to reading what others had written on related matters. Eventually I decided that if I combined my text with one of these others, I could formulate a provocative curriculum. And that is what I attempted to do. No one told me what materials to cover. No one ordered me to package them in a particular format. Based upon what I knew about the subject, the available resources, the sorts of students attracted to the course, and my previous experience teaching the topic, I projected what might work best. Whether I was correct, would take several months to learn. But I had no choice. I had to take a gamble and live with the consequences. Having taught for some years, I knew that I would be able to make adjustments, which I subsequently did. But I also knew that I would be embarrassed by unforeseen defects in my scheme—which I periodically was.

A more extensive example of the pitfalls entailed in planning is provided by this very text. Books are more complicated to formulate than course syllabi. They must be better organized and more tightly planned. Many more pieces need fit together to make a comprehensive whole. A hodge-podge of miscellaneous ideas would be impossible to understand and a waste of time for readers to decipher. Moreover, what is eventually committed to paper cannot be instantly reconceptualized should a reader detect an error.
What has been printed is what is there to be perused. In writing a book it is, therefore, even more important to try to get it right than when speaking in front of a room full of students. As a result, books must be carefully thought through. They cannot be spur of the moment affairs, but neither can they be held in mind as a comprehensive entity. There are simply too many elements; certainly too many for my memory. Planning a book is consequently a multi-stage undertaking. One goes back and forth and makes changes along the way. This takes not only knowledge and intelligence, but flexibility. Authors who are too proud to recognize when they have made a mistake, or too closely bound to their creations to make adjustments, tend not to do well. In this case self-direction entails not just the confidence to strike out on an untested course, but the self-assurance to understand that mistakes are not proof of incompetence.

Let me illustrate with this text as exhibit A. The idea of writing about a professionalized self occurred to me even before I began my research about the middle class. The notion of social mobility had long intrigued me, undoubtedly because it is something in which I have engaged. Emerging from a working class background into an upper middle class milieu left me intensely aware of what I had to learn along the way. What I originally intended to write concerned the guidance needed for making this transition. In fact, I thought more in terms of what it took to be a winner. In any event, I was first forced to examine what it meant to be middle class. This in turn resulted in analyzing the historical development of an entire social stratum, and indeed, social class systems in general. What eventuated was a manuscript entitled The Great Middle Class Revolution; Our Long March Toward a Professionalized Society. Mostly about the progress of commercialization, and the challenges incident there to, it concluded with a
chapter called, The Professional Self. At the time, I expected what I wrote to be expanded into the present work. So confident was I in my ability to achieve this that I immediately began putting ink to paper. Within a month, I had produced a chapter and a half, but then I ground to a halt. My planning had bogged down.

Actually the difficulty was more complicated than this. My first chapter got to page 5 when I realized that it would not work. I had intended to begin with the experience of immigrants moving to a middle class nation, but it quickly became apparent this was too esoteric. Then I switched to my own experience in becoming middle class, but I worried that this was too narcissistic. What really stopped me, however, was the realization that I was missing a huge piece of what needed to be explored. My book on the middle class revolution was a venture in history. It explained how society became middle class and the consequences of this for the contemporary culture wars. What it failed to do was project these transformations forward. It would, therefore, be necessary to engage in an exercise in social prognostication before exploring how individuals become professional. How would it be possible to tell my readers what they needed to learn if it was not clear what kind of world they would enter? The upshot was a manuscript entitled A Professionalized Society: Our Real Future in which I speculate about the impending dynamics of a mass techno-commercial society.

When I began writing this new work, I had been thinking in terms of a “professional self.” But it quickly became apparent that I could not write a work entitled “A Professional Society.” The American Medical Association and the American Sociological Association are professional societies. I would have to change the concept to a “professionalized society” in order to keep the ideas distinct. But then the
professional self would have to become the “professionalized self.” This was not a big
deal, but it was a modification in what I originally intended. More significantly, were I
too write an entire manuscript on the subject I would have to modify the chapters
included. The carefully crafted outline I thought I would write would have to be tossed
in the circular file and another pasted together from scratch. Years before, when I was
just starting out in the writing business, this would have been too painful to contemplate.
It would have felt like a personal failure rather than a normal aspect of the planning
process.

Planning is a skill. It is something one learns how to do. It takes patience and an
ability to stand back and look at the larger picture. It also takes an ability to distinguish
between mental constructs and concrete realities. With book writing, it is important to
have a feel for where one is heading before attempting to get there. As a result, the
various modifications in what I now think of as my middle class trilogy left me stalled—
apparently doing nothing. Had my father been around to observe me during this hiatus,
he would have accused me of procrastination. Why, he would have wondered, was I just
sitting around staring into space? And what was this business of going for long walks
and watching rabbits scramble for cover? A productive person should sit down in front
of his computer and begin writing. He would force himself to work rather than luxuriate
in self-indulgent laziness. What Dad would not have understood is that planning cannot
be coerced. It often takes time to think things through. Faced with the uncertainties of a
complex enterprise, it may be necessary to read, talk, and/or daydream. Answers come at
unexpected moments. With me, I occasionally wake from a deep sleep with the solution.
Sometimes, while watching television, I realize how two and two can be put together.
The point is to keep on going and not arbitrarily force the issue. Doing something before it feels right regularly ends with scraping what I have done and beginning afresh later on.

Another of my father’s complaints was that I had “big eyes.” I would decide that I wanted something, but after I got it, it would prove more than I was able to consume. I literally wouldn’t finish all the food on my plate or play with the toy I had lobbied so hard to purchase. Thus, after having pleaded for a wood burning set for months on end, once it was mine, I played with it for just a day, then consigned it to a closet never to emerge again. Obviously I had no idea of what I liked. More fickle than the archetypal woman, I never stayed with anything long enough to finish. As a child, this made me feel guilty. After all, it was true that frequently what I thought I would like, when obtained, I did not. Today I realize that this too is part of the planning process. Oftentimes it is impossible to know what will work without first testing it. Planning entails experimentation. Ideas have to be explored and potential forms of implementation investigated. Uncertainties do not dissolve merely because they are uncomfortable. Solid experience may be necessary to separate the sheep from the goats. Indeed, I see this every term in my classes. Invariably, when I ask students to introduce themselves, a significant proportion apologetically admit to not knowing where their interests lie. Many have switched majors or specialties within majors. They have absolutely no idea about the sort of work they will do. For the most part, critical of themselves for aimless drifting, they have not yet discovered that they are in the midst of open-ended explorations. They do not understand that they are being flexible planners and providing themselves an opportunity to unearth innovative solutions. Nor do they realize that it takes courage to endure uncertainties without prematurely closing off options.
Middle class self-direction exhibits itself in numerous forms of planning. It can be as simple as writing lists before going shopping or as complex as developing a business plan. Sometimes it involves pouring over brochures before deciding where in Costa Rica to tour; sometimes it is making sure that the gas tank is filled or that the required courses are completed before petitioning for graduation. In order to plan, middle class types must peer into the future. They must control their impulses so as to conform their actions to the possibilities. At least to some extent optimistic, they must believe their projections can make a difference. But when they don’t, they must be resilient enough to persist. Despite the normal disappointments to which all of us are heir, they must not abandon themselves to fatalism. Human control is never total no matter how well thought out. Middle class types must know this and be prepared to live with it.

Risk Taking

My little brother, the lawyer, exemplifies another of the attributes of the middle class style of life. More than a decade younger than me, when it came time for him to enter adulthood, he was forced into a precocious independence. This compelled him to do something, which I must confess, he has been better at than me. He had to become a big-time risk-taker. Joel left our parent’s house at the age of nineteen. After years of enduring the brunt of our father’s insecurities, he escaped into marriage with another nineteen year old. Since her family had money, they assisted him in purchasing a floor covering business. Barely into his twenties, he became the manager of this enterprise, as well as its primary installer. In fact, he turned out to be good at both of these endeavors. Had he wished, he could probably have gone on to be a successful retailer. But this was
not what he wanted. To begin with, he felt obliged to obtain a college diploma. Whatever else our family heritage provided, the need to be an educated person was part of the package. Joel could not have lived with himself had he not demonstrated academic competence; hence, whatever else he was doing, he made time for his studies.

Still, this was not enough. The dream of being a lawyer had apparently been instilled in him as well. Becoming an attorney was a well-established Jewish tradition, but the contentious argumentation with which he, as a youngster, had been surrounded surely played a role. In any event, time was made to go to the University of Miami’s law school. Once he graduated and passed the bar, it was time to build a different future. Unfortunately, by this point his marriage was on the rocks and so he decided to pursue his career in a new location. Despite not knowing a single person in the Tampa area and not even having professional contacts there, he decided to take a chance. In short order, a local attorney hired him as an associate. For the next year, Joel applied himself to learning his new trade. Beginning again from scratch, in part because he had ceded all of his assets to his now ex-wife, he found a place to live and ways to keep happy. Eventually, however, he became dissatisfied. The more he progressed as a lawyer, the greater the envy he detected in his colleagues. Ultimately he concluded that he would have to take another, even larger, risk. He would have to open up a law office of his own.

Once more Joel was to move out on a shoestring without external support. Although he had barely enough to cover his expenses, he was able to attract his old firm’s legal secretary to join him. She apparently had confidence in his ability to make a go of things. In this, she turned out to be correct. Bringing only a few clients with him to this
new venture, he charged out into a competitive commercial landscape determined to carve out his share of business. Although he had never done so before, he got involved with the local welcome wagon, joined the chamber of commerce, and began to advertise. So tight were finances that in the beginning he agonized over every check. During this period, whenever the two of us talked, he would boast (albeit modestly) of individual achievements. Often he was both amazed, and relieved, that a particular case brought in several thousand dollars. Likewise, he was intrigued by the intricacies of attracting clients. Almost every month he experimented with something new, in the hopes that it would succeed.

Not only was Joel flying without a financial net, he was still unsure about the type of law in which he would to specialize. By now he had entered his second marriage and in the process become a father, hence he had familial responsibilities to fulfill. Nevertheless, he was compelled to experiment with a variety of clients. Some, such as those entailing bankruptcy, were not especially challenging, but offered the reward of helping people in need, whereas others, such as family law, were enormously challenging, but emotionally draining. Eventually this was to sort itself out as he became so successful that he hired several additional legal secretaries and a covey of lawyers who did not share his talent for managing risks. Now he had to learn how to train these others to perform their assignments. Once more Joel proved up to the task. From the outside, it may have seemed that this was a smooth course. Given his large and loyal clientele, as well as the financial rewards that continued to accrue, his success may have appeared preordained. From the inside, however, it was anything but. Joel always knew that failure was possible, yet it did not deter him from plunging ahead. As the years passed,
he became the epitome of self-direction. Nevertheless, this would not have occurred had he not had the courage to confront ever-greater challenges. Each time he attempted something new, he could not know it would work out. He simply trusted to his expertise and ability to endure whatever reverses might crop up. If he became a locomotive to which others attached their carriages, it was because he had long been a little engine that would not be stopped by adversity.

On a more modest scale, the connection between risk-taking and middle class discretion can be seen in another story related to me by Ed Clack. After he became a captain on the Smyrna Georgia police force, primary among his duties was training young officers for their assignments. One of these men was having difficulties. Coming up from working class origins, he was determined to be a success in this socially responsible position. The problem was that he was conscientious to a fault. Like many with blue-collar roots, he believed that the rules are the rules. Having been trained in conformity, he now demanded absolute conformity from the citizens with whom he dealt. Quite naturally, many of these resented a demand for obedience from an officious police officer. This generated so many conflicts that the police chief asked Ed to intervene. Could he help calm this guy down before he sparked a fight that required his dismissal?

The opportunity for an appropriate intervention came from an unanticipated quarter. Ed had been trying to explain the difference between procedural outcomes and social outcomes, but to little avail. The young man could not seem to distinguish between what the rules said and their impact when enforced. This day the young cop had been called out to what was thought to be an auto theft. When he arrived, he discovered that it was really a case of a homeless man seeking warmth in a parked vehicle. In
attempting to determine his identity, the young officer obtained the man’s drivers license. Upon examining it, he discovered that it had expired. Procedure told him that it was his job to confiscate the document. But there was a snag. The man explained that the only way he had been able to support himself was by getting day jobs at the labor pool located at a nearby mall. But in order to get these jobs, he needed identification and the only form of identification he possessed was this expired license. Could he please keep it so that he could continue to work?

This put the young officer in a quandary. What was he to do? Procedure said to take the license, but his heart told him to let the man keep it. Thoroughly conflicted, he did not know which way to go. It was at this point that, fearing the worst, he approached Ed to ask if it were all right to show compassion. The young man did not know it, but Ed was delighted at this turn of events. It demonstrated to him that the officer was learning the lesson of discretion. He was finally realizing that if you took the rules too literally, lots of bad things could happen, but that if you exercised independent judgment, you risked being disciplined for violating your oath. In the end, you had to take a chance. What he and most good officers eventually discover is that it is necessary to exercise judgment despite the uncertainties. Whatever the official regulations demand, the unofficial norms of the organization support the use of common sense. Although there is no guarantee that other officers will understand one’s decision, the alternative is a dangerous rigidity. In Ed’s words, in asking permission to return the license, the officer demonstrated that he “had arrived.” He was developing the confidence to apply the expertise he had been developing to real world situations. He was becoming his own
professionalized man in a way that suited the exercise of authority within a democratic society.

**Choices**

The day after Thanksgiving dinner at my brother’s home attested to another aspect of being middle class. Once the morning newspaper arrived, the women poured through the ads for the holiday sales. Appetites now whetted for bargains available at no other time of the year, they felt compelled to go shopping. For the men, this was no problem. Experience had long since prepared them for this seasonal ritual. In due course, an expedition was fitted out to go to one of the area’s largest malls. As it happened, the group’s arrival coincided with the lunch hour so the first stop was the food court. There they found themselves encircled by a veritable United Nations of humanity. Hundreds of people of all shapes and descriptions, speaking a multitude of unintelligible dialects, milled around as they girded their loins for the marathon to come.

During the Middle Ages, a scholastic adage told the story of Buridan’s ass. It seems that a donkey was placed an equal distance between two bales of hay. The question was which of these would the animal approach. What reason, given the identical pull of each, would he have to prefer one over the other? Since they were exactly the same distance, there were no grounds for choosing between them. The result was that the creature was frozen in place and ultimately died of starvation. This, however, was not a fate that awaited the Thanksgiving shoppers. Most of them loved the prospect of choosing from a wealth of attractive possibilities. Surrounded by hundreds of stores selling millions of items, unlike Buridan’s ass, they were not immobilized by indecision. As members of the middle class, they were practiced in making these sorts of
distinction. Indeed, many enjoyed the challenge of deciding what was best. Which were the more stylish items of clothing? What were the most practical Christmas gifts? Which were the greatest bargains. Later in the day, when they got back home, they would compare notes to determine who had been the most expert in deploying consumer skills.

Among the central proficiencies of the professionalized self is making choices. The unprecedented affluence provided by the middle class revolution demands a myriad of selections as to what will meet personal needs. Unlike the peasants of medieval Europe, dinner will not automatically consist of a bowl of gruel, occasionally made more appetizing by a piece of rotting meat. “Peas porridge hot, peas porridge cold, peas porridge in the pot ten days old.” So went the old ditty, which is now a curiosity. The modern American may worry about the freshness of the day-old Chinese take-out in the refrigerator, but not the monotony of a diet based on local agricultural products preserved by rudimentary forms of storage. Forget about being deprived of Chilean grapes in the depths of winter. Forget about losing the luxury of frozen TV dinners or expeditions to Japanese restaurants for sushi. Experimenting with food from every corner of the globe has become a national mania. The very breadth of the available options has become a routine pleasure. People pride themselves on discriminating between California and French wines, between bok choy and nappa cabbage. They savor these alternatives as a birthright.

But food is only one small corner in which people have become knowledgeable decision makers. They can also tell the difference between numerous on and off-road vehicles, a huge variety of do-it-yourself power tools, and the host of electronic gadgets
that spawn replicas faster than aphids on a rose bush. Joel, incidentally, is a gadget aficionado. Whatever new device comes on the market is sure to make it into his home. Be these bread-makers, personal wine brewing kits, or rooftop weather centers, he is among the first to test them out. I am less adventurous, but not long ago I ventured out to purchase an arrow. All I wanted was a single shaft to use as a gag gift for a friend’s fiftieth birthday. (The idea was to illustrate what a straight arrow he is.) Unfortunately the first place I visited only sold high quality arrows in sets of six or more. Luckily, the second place was better supplied. It had dozens of types of missiles, a large number of which could be procured by the single projectile. The point is that modern market has become so segmented that almost anything imaginable is available someplace. No longer are people beset by shortages, but the exact opposite. What is more, professional selves, habituated to making distinctions between these products, like it that way. They want choices. They enjoy determining which is best.

As I was leaving the sports store where I found the arrow, I noticed a trick golf ball guaranteed not to be hit straight. I decided to get this too because my friend is an avid golfer. Indeed, the establishment boasted thousands of unusual articles for dozens of sports, some fairly standard, others more exotic. This reminded me of Brooks’ depiction of suburbanites. He described theirs as an ideal world modeled on the pseudo-perfection of the golf course. Supposedly lacking in creativity, they purportedly radiate a calm confidence that would make Dick Cheney envious. But this picture is grossly overdrawn. It is a portrayal of the middle class derived from an automobile trip through their neighborhoods. It is a rendering based on externals. The outcomes of self-directed decision-making are there, but not the internal processes. Middle class types are not
nearly as boring as Brooks suggests. If they appear to be the essence of dreary equanimity, perhaps it is because they are updated versions of Spencer Tracy. Tracy was known for making his naturalistic acting style look easy. From the outside, it didn’t even seem as if he were acting. Could it be that members of the middle class are doing the same? Could they be keeping the effort they put into decision-making private?

One thing is certain; golf is not the only game they play. They also engage in tennis, go-cart racing, boating, and skydiving. They are likewise active participants in backyard basketball and enthusiastic spectators of baseball and football. Yes, they take care of their lawns, but they also coach their kids at soccer. Let us, however, return to golf. Brooks makes it sound as if the pursuit of par is all about taming the anxieties of modern life. The tactic seems to be that if you dress casually, you will be casual. Yet there is something far more fundamental taking place. The chief difference between golf, and let us say bowling, is not that one occurs outside and the other inside. A more important distinction is in the degree of self-control required. Golf, as anyone who has played the game must know, can be infuriating. As quiet as it may seem from the outside, inside steaming passions press for release but must be kept under wraps lest they result in an errant shot. Hitting a golf ball properly is a matter of less than inches. All that separates a hole-in-one from an egregious hook can be a few millimeters. This makes it imperative to concentrate. Whatever one’s insecurities, whatever the distractions, it is essential to remain disciplined. One must keep one’s head down, one’s eye on the ball, and one’s follow through on line.

Why, given the potential frustrations of staying in complete control, would anyone want to participate in such a sport? Why would someone want to subject
him/herself to an activity that invites the misery of failure with every swing? The answer, ironically, is that controlling one’s frustration is the primary challenge. It is what makes the game worthwhile. In the past, when social success depended upon horsemanship, men such as George Washington spent hours in the saddle. They understood that this could be painful on the buttocks and the back, yet they voluntarily paid the price for the pleasure of becoming expert at a skill that led to widespread admiration. Contemporary golfers do no less. They may seethe inside when a ball gets lost in the rough; nevertheless this is compensated by the joy of getting closer to beating par. The self-discipline demonstrated by a good score is evidence of competent self-direction. It is proof positive that a golfer did not go off half-cocked when confronted with adversity. It is also proof that a person possesses the ability to make good choices. He/she evidently has the self-possession to remain calm while assessing multiple options. Golf is not about being dull; it is about being sufficiently controlled to be a winner in an environment suffused with difficult choices.
Chapter 3

Movin’ on Up

Movin’ on In

The Spanish Conquistadors were not the only European adventurers in search of wealth. Millions of ordinary folk looked across the Atlantic toward a modern land of milk and honey. Unlike the Hidalgos, they did not intend to loot the Aztecs (or Incas) of their treasures. Steeped in productive labors, ordinary folk expected ordinary work to be rewarded with riches. As everyone knew, America was the land of opportunity. So vast were the possibilities, the streets might as well be paved with gold.

What they found instead was a middle class haven to which they did not yet belong. Back home they were craftsmen and farmers, but in the New World they would eventually pioneer a professionalized society. Some, to be sure, would cross the Great Plains to open up what was then virgin territory, but many more would lay the foundations for an emerging techno-commercial universe.

Indeed, the United States was to host the first truly middle-class society in the history of the world. Other civilizations have boasted segments of their population that were neither aristocrats nor peasants, but something in between. As far back as the ancient Greek world, a significant number of merchants and artisans lived lives of comfort and relative independence. Moreover, as citizens of insipient democracies, they participated in determining public policy. Nonetheless, the dominance of today’s bourgeoisie is special. It is utterly unprecedented. Today, most Americans proudly proclaim themselves to be middle class. Although many harbor dreams of winning the
lottery and becoming over-night millionaires, they are not ashamed to be average in a
country where average is a cut above what is has ever previously been.

The immigrants who participated in this adventure might be described as having
undergone a sea change. In making their way across a vast ocean, they not only switched
locations; they exchanged ways of life. Theirs was to be a major shift in their personal
routines, in those of their offspring, but also in those of humankind. Forerunners for
millions of others who would follow behind, their stories illustrate how difficult the
transition to a professionalized existence has been. Starting out labeled “the wretched
refuse” of a teeming, semi-feudal shore, unbeknownst to themselves, they were to
constitute an integral segment of a bridge to an uncharted future. Surprising truths were
to be discovered and attitudes thoroughly overhauled as they adjusted to opportunities
they could not have foreseen. In many cases, like updated versions of Moses, they would
not personally enter the Promised Land. This honor would be reserved for their children
and grandchildren. In becoming card-carrying members of a sovereign middle class,
their descendents would metamorphose into social leaders unrecognizable to their
ancestors.

This much should not be astonishing. Part of the American mythology is devoted
to the near miraculous conversion of unpromising human material into prototypical
Americans. In breaking the chains of European bondage, and in submitting to the
hardships of the melting pot, they would thrive in a land of rugged individualism. The
marvel of this account is that it is largely true. Millions of venturous souls, in risking all,
gained the advantages of a democratic, market-oriented society for themselves and their
posterity.
Less broadly appreciated is that homegrown Americans have also undergone dramatic shifts as they too have profited from comparable opportunities. The immigrants moved into a land of possibilities that enabled the daring among them to move up. But many native-born Americans also have had to make massive shifts before they could do likewise. For the latter, the move was not across an ocean; they did not have to renounce the soil of their ancestors in order to seek something new. For them, the migration was from the farm to the city, and later from the city to the suburbs. For many others, it was from one part of the country to another. In any event, for social mobility to occur, a wrenching change had first to intervene.

If professionalization entails becoming a self-directed decision-maker, a person must first become self-directed. He or she has to become an independent individual who is capable of autonomous choices. Those who simply repeat the experiences of their parents or grandparents are rarely innovators. Uncomfortable with self-sufficient planning, risk-taking, or decision-making, they are unlikely to lead others. However nice they may be as human beings, they have difficulty assuming stand alone responsibilities. More apt to seek approval from familiar authorities, they do not become expert, self-motivated authorities. For this to occur, a profound separation is often necessary.

In a middle-class world, people must learn to think of themselves as freestanding human beings who can be self-reliant. Despite all of the uncertainties of depending upon one’s personal judgment, they have to acquire the courage to make mistakes, to suffer setbacks, but to persevere nevertheless. They require the courage to stand up to others who disagree with them without collapsing in a puddle of self-doubt. In the final analysis, it is their own opinion of themselves that needs to take precedence. As
independent decision makers, they must ultimately be able to evaluate their judgments to
determine their worth, and then to proceed accordingly.

This is not to say that becoming an independent decision-maker requires a
complete separation from other human beings. Not only would this be lonely; it would
be self-defeating. To be human is to interact with other human beings; it is to share, to
collaborate, and to learn from others. People who are completely isolated cannot be good
leaders. If they are utterly detached from others, they cannot determine what others need.
Or if wholly self-reliant, they will have difficulty assembling the alliances that permit
complex tasks to be achieved. Personal autonomy, as it applies to middle-class
professionalism, is a balancing act. Self-motivated experts must sometimes buck the tide,
but at other times go with the flow. This means that they must be in touch with
themselves and others. When to be which can, of course, be difficult to determine. Yet
this is just one of the problems decentralized social leaders must unravel.

The necessary separations typically begin in one’s family of origin. Psychologists
have long been aware that the terrible-twos are a period of individuation. Toddlers, in
learning to walk and enduring the rigors of toilet training, normally become infuriatingly
negative. They seem to want to do everything by themselves—even when they have no
idea of how. The point is that in learning to do for themselves, they often reject readily
available help. A parent, for instance, might offer a steadying hand only to have it
pushed aside so that the child can stumble unassisted across the living room floor. The
broad smile, once this is accomplished, is but a small indicator of the sense of triumph
derived from personal mastery.
A skill not personally mastered is generally reckoned as no skill at all. This kind of scenario is later repeated on a larger scale as a child transitions into adulthood. There too it is necessary to face some challenges virtually alone. Most parents hate to see their children tumble and fall, but no one, no child or adult, can be certain of his/her abilities without testing them against reality. The thrill of realizing that one has achieved control can only be had by obtaining control. Ironically, well-intentioned assistance can obviate this accomplishment.

And yet there is an even greater irony in achieving a professionalized self. All too frequently families of origin cannot provide help even when they desperately want to. The children of immigrants usually discover that their parents do not know enough about their new country to provide useful advice. Often not even fluent in the language their young must master, they have little knowledge of the political or economic environment in which success must be sought. With their own social networks circumscribed by other immigrants and their occupational achievements limited, they have neither the entry nor the insights to smooth the progress of their offspring. They may urge their young to get a good education and approve when they attain notable landmarks, but they cannot warn them of pitfalls they do not recognize. They cannot, for instance, explain how to get good credit if they have never experienced seeking credit. Here one is reminded of the sentimental play Mama’s Bank Account.

Under the best of circumstances, assuming that they are themselves in good emotional shape, immigrant parents can offer sound counsel about the human condition. They may also constitute a cheering section just when a cheering section is needed. This is no small contribution, but it cannot save their children from operating blind in many
situations. Although they may abhor it, a generational separation is inevitable when parents and children occupy different social worlds.

This same sort of parental limitation occurs in the case of social mobility. One of America’s most enduring myths is that parents always want their children to surpass them. Since they anticipate being outdone by their offspring; they happily provide a leg up when they can. At the very least, they experience pleasure when their children succeed. Theoretically, parents do not undermine their young or feel envious of them. They certainly do not throw obstacles in their way or criticize them when they have done well. Sad to say, in the real world this is not always true. Parents are human beings too. Some envy their children’s achievements, especially when contrasted with their own disappointments. It is not unusual, for instance, for fathers who never went to college to be critical of the highfalutin language of a recent graduate. Some go so far as to sabotage their children. Continuously carping on their alleged desire to be better than their elders, they demand that socially mobile children maintain the lifestyles of the parent’s youth. My own father, for instance, wanted me to wear a felt beenie just like the one he wore as a teenager.

Such parents may offer verbal encouragement only to contradict it in action. Nor do they provide the resources needed to move ahead. To the contrary, they act in accord with an old Portuguese anecdote. The Portuguese fishermen of Massachusetts frequently describe themselves as being like a bucket full of crabs. They know that when they throw crabs in a bucket, they don’t have to worry about preventing their escape. No cover will be needed because the crabs on the bottom reach up to pull back any other
crustacean that tries to climb out. The Portuguese say that they too pull back any of their
number that attempts to climb above the others. In this, they are not alone.

Even when parents genuinely encourage their young, if there is a difference in
social class, the older generation is in the same predicament as immigrant parents. They
too have neither the contacts nor the insights to assist in the professionalization of newly
minted members of the middle class. They may know what they see in the movies or
read in books, but second hand knowledge cannot compete with the realities their
children must surmount. Moreover, no matter how much they love their parents,
members of younger generation will recognize the older one's limitations. Sooner or
later, if they want to get ahead, they will oppose what they have been taught. They
separate themselves intellectually and emotionally so that they can operate as self-
motivated experts in areas where their parents are demonstrably inexpert. This may be
painful to do. It may seem like an act of betrayal, as well as an irrational plunge into
precocious independence. Yet many millions of would-be professionals do this every
year. They make major shifts in their lifestyles, the full ramifications of which they
cannot know until their consequences have been sorted out. Driven forward by ambition,
they lurch into the unknown because they have little choice.

To this must be added one further complication. Those intent on moving up the
social class ladder carry their attachments to previous generations along with them.
Having typically been reared by working class parents, they will have internalized the
standards that apply to a world that is not to be their own. Trapped by a cultural lag, they
are personally committed to values and beliefs that do not fit their emerging status. We
human beings are not infinitely plastic. We do not change shape every time our
environment changes. Each of us carries a series of internalized scripts that bind us to the circumstances in which these were created. Having been taught to be obedient by parents who learned obedience on their jobs, we feel guilty when we strike out on autonomous paths. We may know that we have to make independent decisions, but our emotions tell us that this is wrong.

Moreover, excising such feelings from our guts is not an intellectual affair. We do not rationally decide that it is time to move on. Sometimes we must separate ourselves from the selves we were so that we can become the persons we want to be. To become personally professionalized, we must not only insulate ourselves from the inappropriate influences of our parents as they are today, but also from their influences as they were when we were young. Growing into a position of leadership may thus mean growing out of a position of dependence. It may also mean becoming stronger and more independent than once seemed possible.

**Immigrants and In-Migrants**

My grandparents were among the many European migrants who did not understand that they and their children would be breaking ground for a new way of life. Nor did they realize that they and their offspring would be transformed in the process. They thought of themselves, not as social leaders, but ordinary people performing ordinary tasks. They did not conceive of themselves as self-directed decision-makers. Coming from the old Russian Empire, becoming self-motivated experts was the furthest thing from their minds. Although they took a huge risk in crossing an ocean to an unknown fate to a place where they did not even know the language, they thought in terms of earning a living, not influencing social policy. Yes, America was a land of
freedom and in escaping from oppression they demonstrated how much they valued personal sovereignty, but they thought more of becoming safe, rather than of exploiting political liberty to invent new styles of life. The need to prepare their children for the challenges of freedom was beyond their ken.

My father’s parents came from the Polish city of Bialystok. Exactly what their situation had been while there has been lost in the mists of time, but my understanding is that my grandfather Joseph was a scribe who worked for a local aristocratic family. He was apparently a well educated man, but this did not protect him from the hazards of the pogroms then sweeping through the community. By 1898, events reached a climax. In one of the worst urban riots of the period, local Poles and Russians rampaged through the streets beating and killing the Jews they encountered. Envious of the economic strides recently made by what had been a pariah people, they were determined to take them down a peg. My grandparents barricaded themselves in their apartment. Helpless to quiet the storm, they could do little more than ride it out. Already the parents of two little daughters, they decided that it was time to emigrate. They would make their way to the United States even though they had no connections there.

Once across the Atlantic, there was the predicament of earning a living. Since there was no hope of deriving an income from linguistic skills in an unfamiliar language, Joseph became a small businessman. He purchased financially troubled candy stores, built up their business, sold them for a profit, and then repeated the operation elsewhere. This entailed both long hours in the store and frequent moves around New York City and northern New Jersey. As a result, he neglected his family. Well loved and gentle, he was almost never at home. This territory was ceded to his wife Flora. Unfortunately she
suffered from diabetes and spent most of her life in bed as a semi-invalid. Their eight children were, therefore, left to their own devices. They prepared their own meals, fought over the little money available for frills, and made their separate ways into adulthood. My father, their fifth child, but the first of four sons, was provided little or no advice on becoming a success. As a boy, he was expected to be successful, but how was strictly up to him. Nor did his siblings fare better. They too were essentially on their own.

My father’s generation thought of themselves as American, but they had to discover for themselves what this meant. Eventually they also thought of themselves as middle class, but, like most of their peers, conceived of this in terms of having a stable job and an adequate income. Dad never did go to college. Sometimes he claimed to have obtained a few college credits, but as a victim of dyslexia during an era when dyslexia had yet to be publicly identified, this seems doubtful. Nor were any of his brothers or sisters college educated. As a result, none of them became professionals, middle managers, or entrepreneurs. Dad became an electronic engineer by dint of his intelligence and hard work; nevertheless, he never thought of himself as professional. Although he bitterly resented being ordered around by bosses who knew less than he did, he conceived of himself as an employee, and even when a promotion to a position of authority came open, he found excuses to shy away. In fact, he feared that had he accepted, his inadequacies would be exposed. People would realize that he did not possess the academic preparation of his colleagues and embarrass him into resigning. It was not until the next generation, that is, my generation, that a university education
became the norm. It was my cousins and I who went on to become doctors, lawyers, social workers, nurses, and college professors.

On my mother’s side, the story was similar. My grandfather Simon began life in a small city on the Dnieper River in the Ukraine. A wild young man, he defied his river boat captain father to open his own wagon painting business. Flush with money, he got into a scrape with the law that ended with this father forcing him to marry the sister of the next-door neighbor. Still determined to be his own man, Simon fled the country without his wife to join relatives in Boston. This was just before the First World War. The intervening hostilities obviously made it impossible to send for his wife Lizzie, who was compelled to stay behind with his family. This was all right with Simon who relished the idea of living the next few years as a bachelor. Able to party because he had a steady income, he did not possess the capital or connections to launch another wagon painting business. He instead worked at the same craft as a wage-earning employee. In due course, after his wife arrived, they began a family that was to consist of three children. As soon as he could, he also opened a house-painting firm. This allowed him the independence he craved, but never the resources to do more than provide modest support for his clan.

Grandma Lizzie was a stay-at-home wife and mother. Cut off from the larger society, she did not learn the English language until the family took in an English-speaking boarder. Like her husband, her ambitions for her brood were limited. My mother, who was the eldest, was encouraged to go to high school, but, as a girl, was expected to go no further. Although she was proud of getting good grades, it never occurred to her to go to college. Her fate was to be a wife and mother. Her younger
brother went to high school too, then went on to become a bus driver. Like his father, he sensed that he was expected to work with his hands. The youngest son was the one who broke the mold. He moved on to higher education, albeit at a school that specialized in the textile trade. Ultimately, he became a salesman. Once more it was left to the grandchildren’s generation to become college educated, and, in this case, to become professional educators, computer programmers, and a pharmaceutical company president.

As this was occurring a not too dissimilar scenario was unfolding a thousand miles to the south. A young man who was eventually to become a United States senator was growing up in the mountains of northern Georgia. Unlike New York City, this was an intensely rural region. Inhabited primarily by the progeny of Scots-Irish immigrants, they had been established in the United States since colonial times. Often derisively referred to as rednecks or hillbillies, they thought to themselves as archetypal Americans. Usually poor and ill educated, they occupied territory left behind by the Industrial Revolution. While the urban enclaves in the north evolved into bastions of commercial activity, hollows in the Appalachian Mountains remained almost as isolated as they had during the days of Daniel Boone. Not too different from the poverty stricken Tennessee hill country depicted in the motion picture Sergeant York, they were a place of wooden shacks, tiny river valleys bounded by steeply wooded crags, and moonshine stills hidden away from the revenuers.

Zell Miller was the proud child of this wild country. Years later he gladly proclaimed himself a mountaineer at heart. But he was a mountaineer with a difference. In contrast to so many of his neighbors, he was to become a young man on the make. Anxious to be successful, he would cross a gulf every bit as broad as that traversed by my
northern kin. Yet this journey is apt to be overlooked. For, although the separation from his past was as momentous as theirs, it was less visible. It too, however, was a multi-generational affair. Millers’ great-great-grandfather arrived in northern Georgia in 1835. In his day, this was not the South of the slaveholding plantation, but a more hardscrabble place destined to remain loyal to the Union during the civil war. Patriotism was in the mountaineer blood and would remain so. So was an insular parochialism. Schooling was rare, as was contact with the outside world.

Yet it was otherwise with the Miller family. Miller’s father, whom he would never know because he died while Zell was very young, became an educator. It was his choice of wife, however, that was to have the greatest impact on the statesman to be. Zell’s mother Birdie was an unusual person. Born on a farm in South Carolina, her mother passed on when she was young, hence she was raised as a stepchild. From the beginning a tomboy, she soon demonstrated a talent for art as well. At the urging of her father, she was to finish college and go on to take courses at New York City’s Art Students League. Quickly disabused of some of her provincialism by the city’s metropolitan ambiance, she also discovered that she would not be able to earn a living as a fine artist. This led her to accept a position as an art teacher at Young Harris, a small Georgia mountain college. It was here, in a tiny town accessible only by a six-hour stagecoach ride, that she met Grady Miller, her eventual husband. He had just returned from serving in the Great War, but they were to have just eleven years together before he succumbed to cerebral meningitis. Left by this tragedy with two children, one seventeen days old (i.e., Zell), no land, no home, and no material wealth, she was forced to fend for herself.
And fend she did. She built a home with her own hands, raised children on her own, and carried forward as a working mother when this was still uncommon. So locally respected did she become, that, upon becoming politically active, she soon won a seat on the city council. Then, after serving on the council for twenty-five years, frequently re-elected without opposition, she was twice elected mayor. A Democrat in the then solid South, she was almost the only female politician in the state. Birdie was clearly a role model for her son. He admired her strength and integrity. And whether he knew it or not, he was influenced by her courage in achieving social mobility by disengaging from her roots—albeit not distancing herself from them. Birdie had not crossed an ocean, or denounced her parents, but was as much of a pioneer as my grandparents. Her migration was not to virgin country, but a new style of life. Having ventured off the farm, and for a while out of the South, she entered territory not usually traversed by women of her era. While she did not cut herself off from her family of origin, she moved beyond it. Not content to be dependent on others, she chose to move up socially by what amounted to an internal migration.

In a sense, Zell followed in the wake of his well-loved mother. He too was to become an educator and a politician, but in doing so, had to establish an independent identity. For him the path led out of the mountains, then back again, then out once more. Like his mother, Zell too went to college, but the U.S. Marines were to sponsor a major excursion away from home. Years later, he would ascribe much of his personal discipline to the lessons learned while in the corps. Upon his return to Georgia, he enrolled in graduate school at the University of Georgia in Athens, where he earned the degree that would provide the credential for becoming a professor at his mothers’ old
school. Soon he would follow her into politics, quickly rising to fill her shoes as the mayor of Young Harris. Then at the tender age of twenty-seven, after tilting at the windmills of the local power structure, he engaged in a hard fought campaign that won him election to the Georgia State Senate. In due course, he would go on to become Lieutenant Governor, Governor, and, following a brief interregnum, U.S. Senator.

Yet what he is probably best known for nationally was standing up against his own party’s discipline while in this last position. Zell was always his own man. One of the state’s best loved governors, his resisted the rising ride of southern republicanism largely because his integrity was so well respected. The author of such measures as the Hope scholarship to provide tuition support for higher education, he, in essence, promoted the middle-class status, he so richly exemplified, for others. In his own way, Miller illustrates social class migration. His upward mobility, while grounded in traditional values, would not have occurred had he not also achieved a tough-minded self-direction. A risk-taker who, once he ventured out of his beloved mountains, was able to hold his own on a national stage, he demonstrated the strength of his internal motivation by standing up against the barbs of his former colleagues in vociferously defending the social polices he believed essential for freedom, economic prosperity, and social justice. His was to be a sturdy example of what it is to become a middle-class leader.

Rites of Passage

Part of becoming the sort of leader Zell did is undergoing a transformation in one’s personal identity. Whether descended from immigrant or in-migrant stock, would-be members of the middle class must internalize a sense of self that includes the right to

* He broke with national Democrats to support the Iraqi war, even defending it before a Republican National Convention
be an independent planner and organizer. Among the traditional professionals, this legitimation is instilled via a strenuous socialization. In acquiring the expert skills of their disciplines, they incorporate more than information. They also undergo an emotional reorganization. One of the reasons that becoming a physician is so rigorous is that it intentionally places novices under stress. They are required to spend long hours in study and hospital practice. Not only does this temper their intelligence; it also tests their ability to deal with life and death situations. The emotionally fragile almost never outlast these assaults on their ego. They usually fold under pressure and drop out.

Successful candidates, in contrast, discover an inner strength they may not have realized was theirs. In the process, their opinions of themselves are transformed, and this, in turn, is reflected in the higher estimation expressed by outsiders. Now looked upon by strangers as doctors, they begin to think of themselves as such. They start to believe that they possess the qualities historically ascribed to these high priests of medicine. The magic that seemed to inhere in the physicians that treated their own infantile maladies now becomes part of their personal identities. It is as if they have passed through an invisible barrier. In a sense, they have been ceremonially anointed as social healers. This, indeed, is what a rite of passage is all about. The very difficulty of achieving professional competence bestows a social legitimation that is ratified in a personal acceptance of this new status.

Among sociologists, the transformation is not as momentous as for physicians. Nonetheless real, it is, as I can testify, curious to experience. From the outside, acquiring a Ph.D. may seem like a rational progression. From the inside, it entails unanticipated twists and turns. At the beginning, most degree candidates expect the course work or the
comprehensive exams to be the greatest challenge. Yet they rarely are. The actual rite of passage occurs in producing a dissertation. Almost half of the students who are accepted into doctoral programs eventually drop out. Most do so when confronted by the need to create a book length piece of original research. Some expect to receive detailed guidance from their academic mentors on how to proceed, but are destined to be disappointed.

When I was in graduate school, this frustration was the chief source of carping among my peers. After class, we would sit around the cafeteria discussing the day’s events. Sooner or later, the conversation turned to complaints about the lack of faculty support. Why weren’t the members of our dissertation committees suggesting which questions to study or how to investigate these? Anecdotes abounded about how someone had proposed a particular topic to his/her team, only to have it summarily dismissed. What was all this about? Did these academics secretly wish to see us grovel at their feet? Were they simply trying to appropriate a God-like status unto themselves?

It took me some time to penetrate the inner workings of this ordeal. Like my friends, I was exasperated by the uncertainty of not knowing how to proceed. Feeling adrift, I was unsure of where to grab hold for safety. Then it hit me. This frustration was part of the process. It was integral to the requisite rite of passage. One day, after we obtained our degrees, many of us would become professors like our mentors. Yet should this come to pass, there would be no one to tell us what research to pursue. Nor would anyone to oversee the preparation of course syllabi. We would, in fact, be required to be self-directed professionals. Others would look upon us as independent, self-motivated experts capable of making autonomous decisions, despite our doubts. In becoming intellectual leaders, the public, our colleagues, and our students would expect us to
embark cutting edge studies in areas never previously investigated. How were we supposed to achieve this? How were we to learn the skills needed to master emotionally hazardous work? In addition, as intellectual pioneers, we would, upon occasion, stumble into embarrassing mistakes. How would we handle this? With no one preceding us into these realms, who would guide us as we blundered forward? Like it or not, we would have to make unaided choices, then live with the consequences.

But wasn’t that what our professors intended? In not providing explicit instructions on how to select a dissertation topic or organize our investigations, weren’t they forcing us to decide these matters for ourselves? And wasn’t the apprehension we endured part of a learning process that obliged us to act independently? Whether we realized it or not, the anxieties of which we complained forced us to become stronger. As a mechanism of personal growth, this might be crude—it was, after all, a sink or swim trial—but it could not be evaded. To mix metaphors, it compelled us to jump through a veritable wall of fire. This it was our rite of passage. If we succeeded, it would demonstrate that we were more capable of independent decision-making than we supposed. If we failed, we would not receive the university’s imprimatur as professional sociologists. Obtaining the degree was a kind of social ceremony. Once that sheepskin was in our hands, it would signify an achievement that reflected upon our character. As such, it would change our self-images. It certainly changed mine. Afterwards, that is, after a decent interval, I began to look upon myself as a Ph.D. I was no longer embarrassed when others addressed me as “Doctor Fein.” The title confirmed that I could do some things most others could not; hence they were justified in looking to me for leadership in these matters.
In our private lives, however, there are few officially sanctioned rites of passage. Little comparable formally confirms that we have become self-motivated experts in our personal affairs. Yet many of us do endure equivalent rites of passage. In emotionally separating ourselves for our places of origin, our self-images are thereby transformed. We gain confidence in our abilities as independent decision-makers both within ourselves and in the eyes of our associates. When this does not occur, the absence of an autonomous competence is striking. It can be so strange as to appear amusing. This was the fundamental premise of the classic television sitcom The Jeffersons. As the show’s theme song proclaimed, it was about a family that was “movin’ on up to the East Side, to a deluxe apartment in the sky.” Supposedly the beneficiaries of middle-class success, they were portrayed as comic fish-out-of-water. Ostensibly having entered a higher social stratum because they earned the money to do so, they failed to incorporate its social skills. Racism was part of their burden, but only part. Confusions regarding what was expected of them were even more troublesome.

The clan’s alpha male, George Jefferson, was depicted as having assembled a profitable string of dry cleaning establishments. Allegedly a successful entrepreneur, he exemplified few of the traits usually associated with commercial acumen. He did not, for instance, understand his customers, his employees, or market trends. A disorganized thinker, he could barely control his volatile temper. Whenever something went wrong, far from quietly planning a victorious response, he exploded in impotent fury. A bona fide businessman with his temperament would have gone bankrupt within a week. This, however, this was entertainment. The fact that he survived these disasters is part of what audiences found so funny. They knew this was not true to life. It was no closer to reality
than were the Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland pictures of an earlier generation. Whenever Mickey and Judy hit a financial snag, they would propose putting on “a show” and by the next day were performing in a production choreographed more lavishly than any Broadway extravaganza. It was by an equivalent magic that George Jefferson managed to keep his enterprises afloat.

In the Jeffersons’ home, a personalized professionalism was gloriously lacking. The family had in no way emotionally separated themselves from its roots. There was no intervening rite of passage that transformed its members into prudent middle-class decision makers. Miraculously plucked from inner city poverty, now it was only their more sumptuous surroundings that certified they had arrived. The trouble was that they had learned little along the way. The roles they played among themselves remained inner city roles. Moreover, the relationships in which they were involved were as capricious as the ones they previously occupied. Worse yet, their higher status was a sham. Supposedly more powerful because they had the multi-digit bank account to prove it, whenever confronted by someone of higher status, they reacted with defensive aggression. To say that George Jefferson had a chip on his shoulder was a gross understatement. His typical response to those who challenged his authority or personal identity was a flurry of insults. On the television screen, this was not depicted as particularly satisfactory, but neither was it displayed as pregnant with disastrous consequences. The Jeffersons always survived their latest crisis to appear again in the next week’s episode. They were never litigated back into poverty or shamed into learning middle-class manners.
In real life, moving up the social class ladder is generally a wrenching experience. It usually takes time, often several generations, and typically involves agonizing personal adjustments. On television, the surroundings change to accommodate the needs of the socially mobile, whereas, in fact, it is usually the reverse. A personal professionalization typically entails modified family roles, new forms of interpersonal relationship, and adjustments in how one asserts social power. All told, there is apt to be a dramatic overhaul of a person’s self-image. Moreover, as he or she learns to interact differently, an individual’s personal evaluation is likely to follow. In fact, the rites of passage endured are rarely as spectacular as George Jefferson’s. They hardly ever entail identifiable social ceremonies or specifiable moments of personal torment. Nevertheless, the transition will be emotionally challenging. Occurring as it does in the day-to-day transactions occasioned by an emerging status, it will call forth anxiety-provoking responses. Just as Ph.D. candidates begin to think of themselves as independent decision makers by being compelled to make independent decisions, would-be members of the middle class respond to a myriad of demands that alter their class related behaviors. In graduate school, there is no single moment when this autonomy appears. Nor is there a single transcendent hurdle that alters a graduate student’s self-image. The separations from what a person was to what he or she will become are gradual and incremental. The same applies to the personal roles, interpersonal relationships, and hierarchical positions of the socially mobile. These accumulate in a series of often unrecognized transformations.

Consider personal roles. Assuming the status of an expert takes time. This is easily seen in the case of an occupational niche. Learning to be a professor, a carpenter
or a senator takes years. But it is also true of personal roles. Becoming a competent homeowner, for instance—assuming one never has previously owned a home—can require years. The necessary skills are not acquired overnight. It also takes time for others to recognize these emergent capacities. Since social roles are interpersonally negotiated, a long series of demands and counter-demands intervenes before the parties recognize that a customary division of labor has been altered. George Jefferson sputtered when others questioned his pretensions. He, however, never learned how to iron out these disputes. Still and all, his quandary is normal. Role partner resistance is equally perturbing to real life role players. Customers can be think headed and teachers impossibly demanding. Nevertheless most people find ways to arrive at compromises. While this can be difficult, an effort at attaining reorganized roles ultimately detaches them from what they once were. When people start looking at them as a “doctor” or as the “boss,” these others become less obstreperous and hence the new role begins to feel more comfortable.

Something similar applies to interpersonal bonds. As someone becomes more professionalized, two things happen. First, the persons to whom he or she is attached change. Friends, colleagues, and organizational associates differ from one’s earlier connections. There is a literal separation from some relationships so that others can become more salient. Second, the nature of specific attachments also change. Working class marriages, for instance, tend to be skewed. The power of a husband and wife are, as a rule, unequal, hence they tend to occupy discrete realms; for example, his domain may be the local tavern, whereas hers is the kitchen. Middle-class marriages, however, are more likely to be companionate. The husband and wife are more apt to consider
themselves partners, rather than rivals. In any event, going from one sort of arrangement to the other can be traumatic. It entails exposing vulnerabilities one would prefer to keep secret. With the Jeffersons, viewers often wondered what was going on. Sometimes the protagonists were prototypically skewed, at other times, for the sake of a theatrical reconciliation, they acquired interpersonal sensitivities otherwise absent. In real life, internal growth tends to be more enduring. People’s identities are restructured, if not with complete consistency, at least with relative stability.

The rites of passage associated with interpersonal power are even more radical. Going from feeling weak to feeling strong, often begins with a recognition that one is more ineffectual than one would like. It entails an admission that one is not as potent as imagined. This can be both frightening and humiliating. It was surely not something with which George Jefferson would have been comfortable. But more than this; to become stronger entails demonstrating one’s new proficiencies in action. Since fantasies have a way of evaporating under stress, merely believing one is stronger will not do. To become a winner it is necessary to defeat others in contests over who is best. Those who find competition anathema may wish to deny that moving up in society is a relative matter. They persuade themselves that everybody can wind up be perched at the top. But experience demonstrates that this is not true. In real life, there are winners and losers. If not all social games are zero-sum, others are.

On a less exalted plane, to become a decision maker generally means displacing others who are equally desirous of making important determinations. This clearly occurs occupationally, but also over such trivial matters as where to eat dinner. George Jefferson, for all his pretensions of superiority, never learned the subtleties of asserting
personal strength. His very instability betrayed his insecurities. He simply was not sufficiently confident to make nuanced responses. As a result, he usually overdid his efforts at intimidating others. Apparently still thinking of himself in pre-entrepreneurial terms, he presented a caricature of the successful businessperson. In a sense, he behaved as a poor person might think a successful one should. Would-be professionals need to move beyond this internal sense of impotence in order to validate an external gravitas. They need to become strong in order for others to recognize that they are. But to achieve this, they must appraise their strengths honestly and deploy them judiciously.

My grandparents, on both sides, obviously launched multistage rites of passage. Theirs were partly physical separations from the old country, but also emotional ones from abandoned ways of life. One-time roles were left behind on the other side of a vast ocean. Thus, grandpa Joseph could no longer be a scribe. Nor was grandpa Simon able to resume his wagon painting business. Former relationships were likewise left behind. Their parents and siblings were forsaken in Eastern Europe, never to be seen again. Grandpa Simon, of instance, was completely liberated from the dominance of a father who could be domestic autocrat. Whatever either of my grandfathers intended, they were thrown on their own resources. Like doctoral candidates who are not told how to create a dissertation, they were compelled to sink or swim in unfamiliar waters. In some ways, the relationships between these men and their wives did not differ much from what they might have been had they never emigrated, whereas those between them and the children were revolutionized. They could not control their young as their parents had controlled them. Nor could they assert the social status of their former situations. Back in Poland and the Ukraine, they were close to the bottom of the heap, yet in America they were to
be even lower down. Grandpa Simon used to make jokes about being a greenhorn, but this was no joke. He understood that, as a foreigner, natives regarded his accent as proof of inferiority and hence looked down upon him. He also knew that this prevented him from asserting himself to the degree he desired.

For my parent’s generation, these rites of passage continued. Moving up from where their parents had been, they too were limited by a lack of social knowledge. Handicapped by what their fathers and mothers did not know, they were forced to make independent discoveries. This interfered with achieving the social roles they sought. Indeed, it was left to my generation to obtain the education and middle class experience that allowed for greater social mobility. Thus, the way my father approached problem solving betrayed a working class mindset. His imperiousness, whether with his wife, children, or peers, disclosed insecurities every bit as much as did George Jefferson’s fits of pique. It was also inimical to personal professionalism. Given his roots and intense discomfort, he never acquired the confidence in his abilities or the savoir-faire later bequeathed to my generation. Building upon what he and his siblings achieved, my cousins and I became more fully immersed in American culture and better educated in its occupational opportunities. This enabled us to move comfortably in areas where he and his bothers and sisters would have felt out of place. We could thus be more assertive in our personal relationships, interpersonal roles, and social positions. It was not that we were smarter or more energetic; we had merely pierced a barrier they had not.

Zell Miller, of course, shattered social barriers more spectacularly than any of my cousins or I. His rites of passage occurred on these shores, but they also entailed becoming educated in skills and emotional disciplines his immediate ancestors did not
possess. My cousins and I each left the New York City of our youth behind and carved out middle-class niches of in separate milieus. We learned to be assertive, articulate, and competent in the performance of demanding social tasks. As such, we acquired greater social authority than our parents or grandparents. Miller did much the same, but at a higher level. He learned to negotiate laws with men and women whose backgrounds were different from the mountaineers of his youth. He also learned to balance his career with the demands of raising a family in collaboration with a comparably professionalized wife. How well he did in these endeavors can be ascertained by the confidence he exhibited in trusting his judgment despite political pressures to reverse his course. He, to be sure, acquired much of his backbone from his mother, but he deserves a great deal of personal credit. Miller truly learned from his experiences. He genuinely became an expert, self-motivated decision maker.

**North**

It turns out there is more than one way to achieve a professionalized status. People can start their upward journeys in different places, with diverse talents, and disparate challenges. The sorts of separation they achieve also depend upon the degree to which they have been held back by the circumstances of their origin. How far they go likewise hinges on the available opportunities. What all have in common, however, is that these passages take time and effort. Moreover they possess a discomfiting emotional intensity. This said, it is important to examine some of the particulars. I now propose to analyze how several of my colleagues at Kennesaw State University engaged in social mobility. All have arrived at the status of college professor, hence they have each become significantly professionalized, but the manner in which they achieved this varies
greatly. Coming, as they do, from different parts of the world and a variety of socio-economic conditions, a one-size-fits-all transit could not have satisfied their respective needs.

I begin with Miriam Boeri (nee Williams). Miriam is the child of an unstable family. Her early life was spent in crisscrossing the country as her alcoholic father migrated from one job to another. His family was originally from Ireland, but he grew up without a mother after an automobile struck her down while he was still small. Present at this tragedy, he apparently felt guilty that she may have died trying to save him. A Linotype operator by trade, he could always find work, but never for long enough to lift his family out of poverty. Miriam’s mother arrived in this country as a sixteen-year-old refugee from Nazi Germany. She was a devoutly religious woman who relied upon fundamentalist Christian beliefs to account for the misfortunes to which she had been subject, including her husband’s addiction. At one point, she sought a college education, but dropped out to take a job at a newspaper. This was where she met her future spouse and where she began her career as a wife and mother.

Miriam was forced by her improvident circumstances to move from neighborhood to neighborhood and school to school. Sometimes she lived in the suburbs, sometimes in the inner city. At times, she was required to accompany her mother as they searched for her father in skid row bars. Miriam still remembers the bowls of peanuts on the bars and the dartboards on the walls that punctuated these expeditions. It was not until the ninth grade that her family temporarily settled down in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. By this time, however, she was thoroughly disillusioned. Precociously independent, she began a search for a more secure way of life. On her own, she traveled to places like
Washington, D.C. and New York City in quest of answers she could not find at home. Innately intelligent and temperamentally conscientious, she would not settle for what she had. Yet given her limited experience, she was not sure where to look for something better.

Like many teenagers interested in music and rebellion, she was attracted to New York’s Greenwich Village, at first, on a Christmas break from college. Since the hippie eruption had not yet completely subsided, she drifted along on its fringes as a semi-runaway. As luck would have it, what she was after seemed to find her in the guise of a religious group. At first, The Children of God did not appear to be a “cult.” Nevertheless, its members made promises that proved seductive to an apprehensive teenager who had been raised upon faith. They preached a loving family grounded in familiar religious aphorisms, but, unlike Miriam’s own family, or at least unlike her father and the ordinary church members with whom her mother associated, they apparently practiced the values they advocated. Not hypocritical like the older generation with which she was familiar, they would actually do God’s work on earth. Like most cults, however, the group enforced a separation from her family that made her more susceptible to its influence. In time, she became so committed to the sect that she happily shipped off to Europe to do the bidding of its leaders in what was for her unknown territory.

The circumstances of this journey underscored Miriam’s ambivalence. On the one hand, she wished to break her attachment to the broken promises of her youth, while on the other, she chose to commit herself to an equally unreliable substitute. The Children of God were deeply engaged in proselytizing. Active members were expected
to sally forth as “fishers of men.” For Miriam, this was literal. She was instructed to seduce promising candidates and reel them in. This she did. As conscientious as she had always been, she truly believed, or wanted to believe, that making converts, by any means necessary, would hasten the arrival of the millennium. But Miriam was also smart. She began to notice that the promises of protection that had been made were not always kept. Despite reassuring spiritual language, the group’s male leadership was, in a sense, as self-involved as her father. Particularly troubled by the sexual exploitation of the member’s children, she kept her peace and soldiered on. Eventually she married a young man she had proselytized and they had children, all the while maintaining her dependence upon the sect. Indeed, she expected to remain loyal for the rest of her life. That this would require her to remain in a spiritually enforced and reflexively conformist poverty did not especially trouble her. Given her background, she anticipated no better.

After fifteen years in the cult, what precipitated a rupture more severe than that with her parents was a threat to her children. As her daughters approached puberty, Miriam could not bear the idea that they would be highjacked for the sexual gratification of the cult’s adult males. She might not have been able to protect herself, but she would not sacrifice them. Although she possessed neither marketable skills nor financial resources, she determined to make a complete break. In time, this required that she move back to the United States. Once home, however, now thirty-eight years old, and without a work record, she was at loose ends. Eventually she decided to go to college and complete an enterprise her mother had only begun. Soon to major in sociology, she transferred her loyalty from evangelical Christianity to social science. It, rather than faith, would enable her to make sense of the tribulations she had suffered. In the process,
while still an undergraduate, she wrote a book about her experiences in The Children of God. Entitled *Heaven’s Harlots*, and released by a major publisher, it was candid to a fault. Largely autobiographical, the work ended with a sociological analysis of what had occurred, and why.

After graduating with honors from Kennesaw State University, Miriam moved on to graduate school where she obtained a Ph.D. under comparably honorable circumstances. So well did she do that she was almost immediately hired for a tenure track position by KSU. It was here that she further progressed toward the culmination of an upper middle-class status. As a child of poverty, this had never been part of her identity. Indeed, she found those whom she perceived as belonging to the upper classes anathema. Thoroughly imbued with an underdog ethos, she could not imagine herself going over to the enemy. Yet Miriam was to endure one more rite of passage. Once she accepted a position of authority, the demands made of her would alter her views of herself and the universe. However much she might conceive of herself as a survivor of crass capitalism, her students perceived her as an authority figure. She was therefore required to act the part. The students expected her to organize classroom presentations and to answer their questions. She was also obliged to grade her classes and do so fairly. Beyond this, there were departmental duties to fulfill. The department assigned her committees on which to participate and reports to write. Still conscientious, she exercised the self-direction demanded by these assignments. Nor was she content with this alone. Miriam wanted to be the best professor in the department. She intended to write the most influential books and be recognized as a national expert in her specialties. To this end, she continued to do independent research and to advance toward recognition
for her studies of cults and substance abuse. She even won a series of major grants to pursue this end.

One way to conceive of the directions Miriam chose is as a classical instance of Freudian sublimation. Instead of being trapped in the same social solutions as her parents, she broke with them, not by denouncing them, but by redirecting her energies along more productive channels. She would not remain enthralled by orthodox faiths, but would understand how they operated. Miriam would become her own person, in part, by helping others liberate themselves from oppressive religious factions. She would also try to understand drug abuse, not because this was a personal demon, but because it destroyed the life of a much-loved brother. In time, regardless of the many qualms she experienced while undergoing these transformations, Miriam began to realize that the world was different from the one her teenage self had imagined. She began to understand what being middle class entailed. Reluctantly admitting that this is what was happening to her, especially after she remarried and had a husband’s income added to her own, little by little she recognized that she had not been completely corrupted by these developments. She still thought of being middle class as entailing hypocrisy, but was willing to play the game.

Among these incremental changes was the realization that middle class people needed the space to think. If they were to be independent decision makers, they sometimes required the peace and quiet to reflect on particular problems. This was driven home to her upon viewing a movie about the Russian Revolution. Suddenly it dawned on her that when the Russians appropriated the grand homes of the upper crust and reallocated the rooms among the workers, this deprived their original owners of the
tranquility they once enjoyed. Consigned to one of two rooms within their former domiciles, they were now surrounded by wailing children and squabbling adults. Herself, at this moment, needful of thinking room, Miriam realized that self-direction could be frustrated by external assaults. In other words, middle-class professionals could not perform competently unless they were freed from the distractions presented by impoverished circumstances.

She also came to understand that a higher status was not equivalent to a trouble free existence. The upper middle class might live in big houses and drive fancy automobiles, but this did not guarantee that they always got to have things their way. Having herself assumed a position of authority, she was confronted with the fact that this entailed limitations. The way she put it during a panel discussion on race relations was that members of the middle class also have to “jump through hoops.” The difference between the poor and the rich was not that only the former experienced frustrations. The real difference was in how they handled these. Successful people tended not to be overwhelmed by failure. They understood that some things were always going to go wrong. As a result, they were not consumed by fatalism. Despite their setbacks, they persevered. Moreover, they realized that they could not win every battle they might be tempted to fight. To the contrary, they had to be selective. Although their resources were greater than those of the lower classes, these remained limited. It was, therefore, essential to engage in triage. Only those battles where victory was possible or where the issue was especially significant deserved their attention.

Even so, these encounters were unlikely to be cakewalks. From the outside, their victories might appear easy, yet from the inside they took effort and an ability to endure
uncertainties. Now herself an insider, it was from this perspective that Miriam was beginning to perceive what was involved and from this perch that she was discovering that with which she would have to grapple.

South

Ed Clack did not have to endure the family instability that had been Miriam’s lot. Yet he too began his career mired in poverty. Born and raised in inner city Atlanta, the neighborhood he called home was known as Cabbage Town for the alleged diets of its inhabitants. Ed’s father came from blue-collar roots and worked much of his life in the printing trade. Nevertheless, his primary identification was with his faith. In time, he became a minister. Starting at the bottom, however, he began with small Baptist congregations, some of which were urban, some rural. These did not offer munificent remuneration, hence the family had to get by on a small ministerial salary, plus what Ed’s mother could earn as a secretary. During the Depression Ed’s family was so poor that upon occasion they had to resort to soup lines to supplement their larder. So poor were they that they could not afford ice for their icebox and had to depend on gathering up whatever shards fell off of the delivery wagons. Not surprisingly, neither of Ed’s parents had been college educated. This was not part of the southern tradition. Even so, they wanted better for their children.

One of the gifts Ed’s father gave his sons was the luxury of choice. Although he wanted them to succeed, he never pressured them into specific vocations. Always urging them to do their best, Ed was taught that it was important to handle adversity with aplomb. When things went wrong, it was essential to carry on with dignity. This lesson came into high relief while Ed was in high school. As something of an athlete, he
competed successfully in city and state track meets. During one of these, Ed appeared on the verge of victory when he stumbled and fell. Distraught, but unbowed, he discovered that his father was pleased with his tenacity in defeat. The lesson that Ed would carry with him into adulthood was that it was not always possible to control the outcome of every activity. Sometimes things went well; sometimes they didn’t. What you could control, however, was the effort you applied. As long as you did your best, you could walk with your head held high.

When it came time for college, Ed was not sure what to study, so despite some misgivings he majored in management. This was the time of the Viet Nam War; hence he participated in military service as well. The upshot was an opportunity for a temporary physical separation from home. Much in the manner of Zell Miller, he joined the Air Force and ventured to an assignment in North Dakota. Upon his return home, still at loose ends, he attempted a quintessentially southern solution. He became a singer/songwriter of country music. This too broadened his horizons, but did not lead to fame and fortune. Something more practical had to be found. A family friend who had become the chief of a local police department soon provided an opening. He offered Ed a job as a police officer. Although this had not been Ed’s childhood dream, he accepted the position with gratitude.

What now began was a protracted period of finding himself. Already equipped with a strong self-image thanks to his loving upbringing, Ed still needed to acquire an independent sense of authority. Since his father’s experience was not directly relevant, he would have to learn most of what was required on his own. Much of this was achieved while working as a police officer, but some came through obtaining a Master’s
degree in criminal justice. Long determined to be good at whatever he did, Ed developed the expertise he needed wherever he could find it.

It is also important to understand that he is not a very large man. Standing only about 5’6”, he is not stereotypical police officer material. Nevertheless, he is wiry and tough, and very tenacious. Among his fellow officers, many of whom were large and brawny, he came to be known as the “Chihuahua.” They appreciated the fact that although he is small, he is as sturdy as a junkyard dog. They also came to appreciate his leadership qualities. Both smart and judicious, he developed a reputation for exceptional judgment. It was for this, as well as his interpersonal skills, that he was eventually promoted to departmental captain. His was thus an extended rite of passage that culminated in a socially acknowledged position of trust. No single event, but an accumulation of complementary incidents, confirmed his ability to exercise professional self-direction. In this, both his understanding of himself as something more than a poor boy from the slums, and the respect of others for his responsive guidance, dovetailed to validate what he had become.

I got to know Ed when he came to teach part-time at Kennesaw State University. What impressed me initially was his quiet common sense. Habitually soft-spoken, he was always the essence of a reasonable man. The students also loved Ed. They understood that his was the voice of experience and his war stories provided insights into what they would soon experience. By and large, he became a paternalistic presence; transmitting to his students the same sort of supportive encouragement his father offered him. And yet, his world had become much larger than his father’s. Still at home in the South, he traveled in circles that would have intimidated his parents. Becoming a college
professor was part of this process. It provided entry to an intellectual world foreign to Cabbage Town. But Ed had also become a champion networker. He was on friendly terms with a large proportion of the local politicians and an even larger percentage of the criminal justice administrators. Although personally humble, he had become a person of considerable influence, albeit never for causes he considered unworthy.

**East**

In the century since my grandparents migrated to America, the nation has never ceased being a magnet for the dispossessed and ambitious. What changed was the direction from which most immigrants came. As the globe became more closely integrated, the virtues of the country’s democratic experience gained international renown. One of the places drawn into its orbit was Southeast Asia. As far away as Thailand, it became known as a land of opportunity. One of those who heard this siren call was Sutham Cheurprakobkit. The scion of a poor Bangkok family, he would one day decide that his future lay in a realm that his ancestors would have found completely alien. Like Ed, his separation from his past did not include a denunciation of his family. Yet even more than Ed, it entailed a dramatic break with what would have been his fate had he not determined to cross an ocean broader than the Atlantic.

Sutham’s father was not an ambitious man. He was a cab driver content to earn a modest living for his family. It was Sutham’s mother who had larger aspirations. She worked hard every day to promote the economic success of her children. Still, among his siblings, it was only Sutham who acted on her hopes. Nonetheless, at first, he did not know where his best prospects might lay. The national police seemed to offer an opportunity for advancement; hence he joined up. There he did so well in training that
the department sponsored a college education in the United States. Since Sutham was both smart and ambitious, he did especially well as an undergraduate. Back home this solidified his position as an officer in the Thai constabulary. It also enabled him to obtain experience as a leader of men. Even so, Sutham was not completely happy. The longer he associated with his fellow officers, many of whom came from social strata above his own, the more keenly he became aware that promotion to the highest reaches of department would never be available to him. In Thailand, as opposed to the U.S., it oftentimes was a matter of whom you knew and what your family connections were. If you came from a poor family, as he did, you were not perceived as top leadership material.

Fortunately, another opportunity arose. So well was he doing, and so well had he previously done in America, that he was sponsored for higher education. Once more he was sent to the States, this time to obtain a Ph.D. in criminal justice. Despite the fact that this was in a foreign country, with a foreign language and strange religion, once again he proved up to the challenge. He not only obtained an advanced degree, but did so in style. Sutham became a first-rate researcher. His achievements were so great that he realized he had an opportunity to teach at the college level in America. But this posed a dilemma. To stay in the U.S. would certify a break with his homeland. Would this be worth the risk? Sutham talked it over with his wife Judy and together they decided to take the chance. Since both liked living in the United States, they also believed that it would open expanded vistas for their son. Moreover, when the occasion arose, they took the chance of moving from Texas, where he got his degree, to Atlanta where there seemed to be more room for personal and professional growth.
At KSU, Sutham took to its untested waters with his usual composure. To begin
with, he worked on improving his English so that his students could understand him. At
the same time, he dove into a variety of research projects with his accustomed vigor. It
was not long before he received the college’s highest award for these accomplishments.
Nor was it long before he became an associate department chair, assigned the task of
coordinating the organization of the fastest growing criminal justice major in the state of
Georgia. All this was achieved while participating in national CJ organizations and
working collaboratively with colleagues from multiple disciplines and diverse
backgrounds. Very much his own man, he got along well with others, all the while
keeping a firm grasp on his personal integrity. His was a burgeoning occupational
expertise and self-motivated climb up the social status ladder.

Part of Sutham’s validation came from the community he had moved beyond.
Now an expatriate and an American citizen, he kept one foot in the U.S. and another in
his native soil. In Atlanta, he quickly became the president of the local Thai association,
but more than this, as a sort of Asian Godfather, he helped many of his countrymen cope
with their surroundings. Although himself as green as my grandfather had once been, he
took novelties in stride and surmounted obstacles with such grace that he became a role
model for others. Even more gratifying was the reception he received when he journeyed
back to Thailand. Each summer he shepherded a troupe of students to study the policing
techniques of his native land. Once there, however, he discovered that he was in demand
as a consultant. The active learning he had done in the U.S. introduced him to social
control techniques still novel among his former colleagues. This made him a social
leader. Evidently now in the possession of an admired professionalism, his insights were
sought and his judgments respected. He had become an international expert with the authority this implied. Despite his humble origins, and occasional self-doubts, he had undergone a dramatic rite of passage to emerge as a valued member of an internationalized upper middle class. With each step he had taken, he became stronger than before. Indeed, as of this writing, he is a full professor working on several new research grants.

Miriam, Ed, and Sutham have all come a long way. Each has had to move beyond humble origins. This was to a greater or lesser degree wrenching and more or less total, but in every case substantial. Separations are not usually heralded as a necessary step toward personal success, but they frequently are. A self-motivated expertise entails self-assertion, which can be hindered by being submerged in established relationships. Professionalized selves have to become their own persons. In making independent decisions, they must be able to listen to the voices in their own heads and not merely those from their past.
Chapter 4

Learning

The First R

During the Middle Ages books were rare. Since each one had to be laboriously copied from existing models, they were enormously expensive. Private libraries that consisted of more than twenty volumes were a novelty. So uncommon were books that most people were illiterate. So unlettered were average folks that the church taught many of its theological lessons in stone. Gothic cathedrals were encased in sculptures depicting Biblical stories because only these visual representations could be understood by most of the faithful. It was not until Guttenberg developed movable type that this situation changed. His invention of the printed book unloosed a veritable blizzard of enlightenment. Books became so cheap that ordinary people could own them. They became so inexpensive to produce that they could be devoted to more than the few religious subjects that had previously dominated scholarly attention. The upshot was an unprecedented increase in knowledge. First the Renaissance, but, quickly thereafter, the Enlightenment, erupted upon the scene. Easily available information built upon previously available information to produce what ultimately became our own well-informed era. Because reading became common, science became common, as did the humanities, political tracts, and management information. Indeed, so much data was to accumulate that by the twentieth century it became impossible for anyone to be a polymath on a Renaissance scale.

Even a consciousness of these developments would not have been feasible without the written word. Human history is itself an artifact of writing. It is the substrate
of our chronicles of the past. Already before Guttenberg, it made a difference. Prior to
the invention reproducible symbols, people were bound by the limitations of human
memory. They could manage to transmit evocative myths in the oral tradition of a
Homer, but not much more. Cumulative social histories, at least in any detail, were
another matter. No body could remember that many names and dates, or analyze these
with any semblance of objectivity. This is why contemporary scholars distinguish
between historical and pre-historical times. It is also why anthropologists distinguish
between literate and pre-literate societies. So glaring are the contributions provided by
literacy that the earliest anthropologists emphasized this distinction by differentiating
between savagery and barbarism, as opposed to civilization. They understood that the
social intricacies underwritten by reading made modern mass societies possible. Among
themselves, they were likewise aware that without reading modern technologies would
not exist. Nor, without the written word, would contemporary administrative systems
function.

It is virtually impossible to acquire the understandings under-girding a
professionalized expertise without the assistance of literacy. People must be able to
consult books and magazines, and nowadays computer screens, if they are to learn what
they need to in order to perform their jobs adequately. They also require the availability
of written materials if they are to be competent in their personal lives. Erudition on a
modern scale would be unimaginable in the absence of nearly universal literacy. So
crucial has this divide become that the difference between an educated and an uneducated
person is typically that between a lettered and an unlettered one. Even people who hate
schooling recognize the importance of reading. If they are personally illiterate, they
attempt to hide this lest they be thought stupid. If they have dropped out of school, they nonetheless respect those who did not. Despite all the jokes about college-educated people being pointy-headed geeks, they are accorded the perquisites of social leadership. Who today would consider electing a grammar school dropout president? Who would want such a person running the corporation where she is employed?

My father was in precisely this situation. He used to make quips about the stupidity of his better-educated superiors, yet he grew nervous in their presence. Privately distressed by his dyslexia, he energetically avoided circumstances that revealed his limitations. Yet his secret admiration was on display in our living room. At the very start of his marriage, before I was born, he constructed two bookcases with his own hands. Then, together with his new wife, he filled these with complete sets of the works of Charles Dickens and Mark Twain. To these, was added a supermarket encyclopedia. Nevertheless, throughout my life, I never saw either of my parents open a single one of these volumes. Although they always featured them in a prominent position, they never so much as perused them. The closest that either came to reading were my mother’s periodic forays into the Reader’s Digest. As the only magazine, save for the TV Guide, to which they subscribed, I grew up believing this was the height of intellectual sophistication.

At about the time I entered high school, I became aware of studies that suggested a correlation between vocabulary and economic success. The captains of industry were said to have a much broader command of the English language than the average person. As a consequence, a series of programs arose that promised to expand an individual’s lexicon. Their premise was that the more words someone knew, the higher up he or she
would rise. This seemed to make sense, hence my exasperation with my performance on the Digest’s word quizzes. What I did not understand was that these trendy encomiums to a strong vocabulary had the relationship backwards. The captains of industry were not successful because they had good vocabularies; they had good vocabularies because they were successful. Or rather, they had good vocabularies because they were voracious readers. In order to perform their jobs they needed to be well informed, but in order to be well informed they had to read. It was in reading that they picked up the words that made them articulate enough to command respect. In contrast to the recommendations of the vocabulary merchants, successful people did not sit down to memorize arbitrary lists of terms. To the contrary, the words with which they were familiar meant something to them because they had been acquired in use. They were meaningful because they enabled them to master the ideas that helped them understand their world. Years later, after I became an academic, I realized that I too had developed the sort of vocabulary I once admired. Having in the interim read thousands of books, when by accident I encountered a copy of the Digest, I was surprised to discover that its language quizzes were no longer a challenge. I had met these words many times before.

In retrospect, I was forced to ponder my parent’s self-imposed functional illiteracy. As an adult, I wondered why they made so many elementary mistakes in raising my siblings and myself. Why hadn’t they consulted the many available guides on parenting? The experts would surely have been able to offer useful advice. Then I realized that it would not have occurred to them to refer to such tomes. Possessed as they were of a blue-collar mentality, they might have picked up a book in response to a classroom assignment, but not on their own. Intellectually, they understood that books
were an essential research tool, but they did not conceive of themselves as independent investigators. More prestigious social authorities might be required to be lifelong learners, but they were not social authorities. Nevertheless, more and more people now need precisely this. As the world becomes more professionalized, it becomes more important for autonomous decision-makers to know where to find the information they require to make suitable choices. In moments of uncertainty, when they do not know the answer, they have to summon the initiative for a self-directed search.

Paradoxically, just as reading skills have become more crucial, advanced technology has offered a seductive alternative. High definition television sets, video cell phones, and flat screen computers provide a walking-talking window on the world. At KSU, not only do our students clamor to be assigned as few books as possible, they also love visual aids. When professors substitute a movie for a lecture, they count it a good day. Many are proud to announce that they are visual rather than verbal learners. Members of the MTV generation, they are more impressed by eye-popping graphics than mind-blowing ideas. Garish colors and kaleidoscopic editing capture their attention. A significant proportion has come to believe that if it looks good, it must be right. In the classroom this is evident in the PowerPoint homilies that have become the preferred mode of making presentations. Where once professors and students hid behind lecterns when forced to discuss their materials, today they take cover behind pre-programmed slide shows. Snappy phrases and flashy pictures substitute for scholarly understanding.

To allude again to the circumstances of my youth, there was a time when I believed that a motion picture about Louis Pasteur was a faithful biography. I could not imagine that so public a portrayal might misrepresent its subject. It was scarcely
conceivable that dramatic license would be so drastically detach what was on the screen from reality. Today’s youth have similar reactions. They too believe what they see. After all, there, before their eyes, in vivid Technicolor and almost three dimensions, as if the camera had been hovering over the shoulders of the protagonists, is an apparent portrayal of the undeniable truth. They know that images can be digitally manipulated, but they don’t care. Theirs has become a world in which comic book heroes come to life; a world where that which seems tangible is treated as if it were. Appearances substitute for facts and few observers are tempted to peek behind the curtain to determine if the wizard of Oz has substance.

Besides, watching movies is easy. It takes little effort to be passively entertained. Reading, in contrast, requires work. One has to sit down and pay attention to almost every word. With movies, if one’s focus wanders, the story continues to unfold. With a book, everything grinds to a halt. Moreover, with a book, one has to figure out the meaning as one goes along. There are complications, correlations, and ambiguities that must be thought through without external aid. Worse still, there are abstractions to be puzzled out, as opposed to an abundance of concrete images, to be effortlessly consumed. But this is the point of reading. A nuanced understanding of complex ideas cannot be achieved without taking the time to think about them. How facts and logic fit together, and how a graphic media might distort them, require attention to detail. Readers must not only incorporate what is set before them, they have to compare this with what they already know. This is how they move beyond where they are to where they need to go.

It is not that reading ought to replace more visual forms of learning; rather they need to supplement each other. There is nothing more persuasive than witnessing the
lifestyle of a preliterate Amazonian tribe on a television screen. Then again, if this is all one knows, it is probably an illusion. Reading about what people think, and how they came to think it, makes for a larger, more accurate picture. The question thus becomes, how can would-be professionals become more self-directed readers? Obviously, to the extent that picking up a book is done only at the behest of others, this will not occur. As today’s students know, it is possible to fake a familiarity with reading materials. Even in my youth, some book reports were cribbed from classic comics. Nevertheless, with the advent of the Internet, plagiarism has become simpler. As a result, the motivation for reading must be internalized. It has to be personally perceived as a means of learning what a person wants to know. Once an individualized expertise is recognized as an avenue to vocational and social success, it will be regarded as less of a hardship. The young must, therefore, be helped to discover that learning based on reading is their ticket to independence. They must come to understand that it is in their interest to be good at what they do; that only this can provide the social authority, and sound judgment, to make viable personal choices.

It is also important to understand that reading can be fun. For starters, once it is recognized that it is personally relevant, it becomes less boring. That which may one day be applicable to one’s real life has a way of being infused with energy. But more than this, reading does not have to be approached like an academic assignment. If what one is reading becomes a chore, it is possible to stop reading. Not every book has to be consumed from cover to cover. Many do not deserve the effort. While it is sometimes necessary to ingest a nourishing, albeit tasteless meal, it often makes more sense to follow one’s personal preferences. There are reasons why some materials are more fun
than others. They are usually more meaningful than the alternatives. In any event, self-directed people have a right to direct themselves in terms of their reading. Instead of reflexively rejecting what is imposed on them, they can take charge of their literary expeditions. As they will discover, there is no better way to expand one’s general knowledge than avocational reading. Grazing amidst the literary clover of one field, then wandering into another, eventually metamorphoses into a sumptuous feast.

Then too there is the connection between the First and the Second R. Good reading can become a bridge to good writing. Moreover, good writing is essential for would-be professionals who wish to communicate effectively. Memos, promotional materials, and voluminous reports make the modern commercial world go round. It is frequently impossible to influence others if one’s arguments cannot be composed in written form. Whether through e-mails, journal articles, or slide shows, the written word may be the only effective entree to their psyches. Furthermore, there is another enormous benefit to writing. Oftentimes the best way to organize one’s thoughts is on paper (or a computer screen). It is amazing how often what one thinks one understands falls apart when committed to the written page. Suddenly there are missing pieces, in the absence of which, the whole fails to make sense. One of my professors explained this to me while I was in graduate school, but I dismissed his advice as an academic rationalization. Time, however, has proven him right. The more complicated an issue, the more difficult it is to keep all of its parts in mind. Writing overcomes this barrier by permitting sequential thinking. It also allows a person to go back to correct that which did not work. Reading and writing have, of course, been both praised and condemned for being linear. They are said to reduce complex realities to an artificial form of reasoning. Still, whatever the
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limitations of linearity, it facilitates comprehensive thought. As importantly, logical judgments can be quite useful to self-directed decision-makers.

The Ivory Tower

One of the unresolved disputes between my father and myself concerned which was more important: theory or practice? He favored practice. Having mastered the complexities of electronic engineering by trial and error, he considered this the best avenue to a sound understanding. On the other hand, what I knew, or thought I knew, was dismissed as scholastic nonsense. How could anyone learn about reality from books? Everyone knew that academics lived in ivory towers. What they wrote about was mostly fantasy. They were like the inhabitants of Laputa, the fictional island in the sky from Gulliver’s Travels. Mostly quack philosophers and pseudo-scientific sophists, they pretended to insights they did not possess. Just because they were articulate in print, did not prove that they knew anything of value. As my father never tired of reminding me, I, like them, was an absent-minded dreamer. With my nose forever in a book how could I distinguish what was true from what was not?

I, of course, responded by disparaging his lack of academic grounding—albeit carefully. Didn’t he realize that sophisticated knowledge only came from books? Wasn’t he aware that the best minds that ever lived contributed to our common store of written wisdom? Besides, this was what my teachers had assured me. To this he replied that I never had a lick of common sense. Oh yes, I might be smart, and maybe my teachers were as well, but none of us understood what really mattered. Too much book learning rotted out the brain. It made people unable to deal with practical matters. So immersed were they in their intellectual abstractions that they were terrified of flesh and blood
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facts. Whenever required to deal with real people in actual situations, they retreated behind a barrage of verbal camouflage. This was clearly my problem. That’s why I was so shy. That’s why I was timid with strangers. If I just got out there into the midst of the action, I would learn to do things, not merely talk about them. My knowledge would then become applied, not merely theoretical.

When Dad and I got down to specifics, I had to admit that my knowledge was limited. Naturally, I did not admit this out loud, but on the inside I recognized that I did not know much about actual relationships. It was one thing to read about love; it was quite another have a love affair. Nor did I understand much about politics. While I read the newspapers and kept track of who was up and who down, I did not understand how they got there. Why did the players choose one strategy over another? More important still, how did they stand up to the assaults of their adversaries? As of yet, I did not recognize the significance of assembling and/or manipulating alliances. Nor did I realize that winning entailed an ability to endure losses. In my teenage imagination, I merely fantasized about receiving the adulation of huge crowds. One day I would do something so stupendous that everyone would voluntarily comply with my desires. These daydreams were comforting, but as my father pointed out, they were riddled with holes. Too many details were missing to make them compelling. My situation was something like that of a priest giving advice on sex. It was one thing to read about the anatomical dynamics of copulation, quite another to appreciate the sensations of coitus.

As I say, these battles over theory and practice remained unresolved. Neither my father nor I ever gave up. It was not until many years later that I recognized we were both wrong. The issue was never which of these is best. Neither alone holds a candle to
a collaboration between the two. To be more precise, theory without practice is empty. It is illusion masquerading as wisdom. Ideas that cannot be applied in real life are no more substantive than were my adolescent dreams of glory. Unless tested against solid facts, they remain idle speculations; mere suppositions about what might be. Fictions can, to be sure, be diverting. They can even stimulate important discoveries. But they are no substitute for them. People who only read, but never venture beyond the pages of books, are as irrelevant as my father alleged. They are trapped in a solipsistic worldview, which, even when it is shared, is as ephemeral as an hallucinogenic vision.

On the other hand, experience without theory is stupid. People who only immerse themselves in concrete realities have as limited a horizon of an arthropod. What makes human beings special is our ability to imagine worlds that never were. Unlike crabs or insects, we can see beyond the rock upon which we happen to sit. As symbol users, we can conjure with invisible possibilities. In our mind’s eyes, we travel to places we have never gone and invent machines never before constructed because we can fabricate them out of words. We do not have to experience events in order to learn about them. Theory, as derived from books, can serve as a guide to opportunities beyond the bounds of individual practice. It shines a light on where we might eventually go. It can also put pieces together than have never so much as touched. In short, practice, absent theoretical knowledge, is blind. It cannot see beyond what it can physically manipulate; hence it is bound to stumble over concealed obstacles.

How theory and practice interact was revealed to me while working at a state psychiatric hospital. After I completed the required courses for my doctorate, I ventured north to Rochester, New York. There, I obtained a position as a vocational counselor.
working with the mentally ill. Brimming with confidence derived from my graduate studies, I was certain that I understood how psychiatric facilities operated. I was equally convinced that I knew how to help schizophrenic patients overcome their condition. Hadn’t I read Erving Goffman’s account of mental asylums? Mental hospitals were clearly total institutions that functioned almost as prisons. They controlled the lives of their inmates for the convenience of the caretakers not the patients. Hadn’t I also read dozens of works on how to engage in psychotherapeutic interventions with psychotics? Surely the notion that these unfortunates were genuinely ill was a grave mistake. They were merely extra-sensitive people that society had labeled ill because of its own insecurities. If a clinician were responsive enough, it would be possible to get through to them and reintegrate them into the community. No doubt, I would be such a clinician. I would listen to my clients and provide them the respect they were due. Moreover, the less well-educated functionaries with whom I would be surrounded would learn to take their cues from me once they recognized how successful I was.

That these were fantasies equivalent to my teenage daydreams only slowly dawned upon me. Fortified by my academic accomplishments, I could not imagine that the sociological experts in whose ideas I had been immersed were wrong. Yet they were wrong. The hospital was not a nice place, that sometimes did feel like a prison, but then again it provided the external controls psychotic patients could not provide for themselves. Later on, the deinstitutionalization movement confirmed this assessment. It demonstrated that schizophrenics thrown out on the street and forced to fend for themselves could not manage their own affairs. As one of the primary causes of the homelessness debacle, this policy proved, to those open to the lesson, that mental illness
diminished a person’s capacity to engage in self-care. It interfered with rational judgment. And, oh by the way, it demonstrated that there were actual mental illnesses. These were not figments of an oppressive civilization’s imagination. The conceit that a schizophrenic’s oddness was in the eye of the beholder was dispelled by the experience of those who tried to communicate with schizophrenics. These people were different; they were not merely more sensitive than normal. Their thought processes were often in a hopeless jumble. Words collided with words as they tumbled forth in total abrogation of meaning. Assaulted by hallucinations and delusions, most psychotics were too fragile to endure the self-examinations central to psychotherapy. A sensitive, responsive clinician might be able to establish a trusting relationship—as I eventually did—but going beyond this to an in-depth personal analysis was virtually impossible. Indeed, it was often a disservice to individuals whose best option was learning to coexist with their demons.

Erving Goffman, I was to discover, spent only about a year as an attendant working at a psychiatric hospital. I was to remain employed in one for over a decade. During this period, it became apparent that some lessons took time to assimilate. Often, what was on the surface dissolved upon greater familiarity with the facts. As one became more intimate with particular individuals and relationships, appearances were replaced by deeper understandings. That which had been kept secret was penetrated once repetition and trust allowed one to get closer to events. In this case, theories derived from reading gave way to more nuanced knowledge. What was learned from books did not become irrelevant. In checking academic ideas against reality, they became better grounded. Mere words were amplified in being attached to concrete instances. Conjectures were
thereby supplemented by the subtleties of actual experience. In the process, some fantasies had to be scuttled; never again to be resurrected. Not surprisingly, experience also benefited from this interplay. Clinical interventions became more practical as a result of the discoveries made by following up on theoretical surmises. Nevertheless, neither side of the theory/practice equation profited unless a learner approached the task with modesty. Only persons willing to acknowledge that a theory might be wrong, or that practical rules of thumb might be incomplete, were likely to be receptive to revised understandings. To get closer to the truth, it was first necessary to admit one’s ignorance. To become a genuine expert, it was crucial to concede the absence of exhaustive knowledge.

Helping professionals typically encounter “reality shock” once they enter practice. The neat categories studied in the classroom rarely survive an encounter with real clients. Actual human beings are too complex and their emotional responses too unpredictable. What frequently occurs is disillusionment. There is a literal loss of the academic illusions once these fail to achieve the promised results. As a consequence, counselors and therapists typically refine their skills in the heat of battle. That which they brought with them from their formal preparation constitutes a platform upon which they build. It is not a finished structure. Genuine expertise is only achieved by interacting with clients and developing an understanding of what works—and what does not. It is from this that an authentic professionalism evolves.

The same is true of most professions. Physicians and attorneys must also refine their skills in the crucible of experience. They too discover that their technical training only takes them so far. Unless they are prepared to be lifelong learners who are
emotionally capable of integrating what they have read with what they derive from the human situation, they are caricatures of professional competence. If they are too inflexible to adjust to real world challenges; they are liable, in self-defense, to become cartoonishly rigid. Yet combining theory and practice is fraught with uncertainties. There can be few textbook accounts of how to merge what are often polar opposites when most texts represent just half of the interaction. Would-be professionals, if they are to be more than academic clones, must overcome their personal anxieties. At some point, they have to jump into the occupational pool and begin swimming. Doctors have to cure real patients. Lawyers have to butt heads with other lawyers and survive the setbacks dealt by obtuse judges.

This need to develop a genuine expertise also applies to semi-professionals and craftsmen. Carpenters, for example, must integrate the theory of cutting wood with actually cutting wood. When what is on a blueprint does not jibe with what is being installed, adjustments must be made. The same applies to the professionalism of personal life. Self-help books can provide a useful guide to the dynamics of intimate relationships, but they cannot substitute for engaging in such relationships. The emotional subtleties of having to make instantaneous decisions in collaboration with a member of the opposite sex cannot be replicated on the written page. Neither can the pain of rejection nor the exultation of acceptance. By the same token, the complexities of office politics cannot be reduced to scholarly formulae. Political scientists may be marvelous analysts, but they can never prepare people for the full scope of the rough and tumble of managerial combat. They cannot capture the emotional impact of personal betrayal or the mental burden of organizational responsibility. Players who cannot devise
successful political strategies on the fly are destined to be overtaken by the machinations of those who can. Unable to assemble working coalitions composed of divergent personalities, they are defeated by more interpersonally skillful opponents.

Worse still is the wreckage wrought by ivory tower illusions. Understandings based primarily on abstract speculations can be no sturdier than the happy endings of fairy tales. When these become the touchstone of collective action, they usually have disastrous consequences. One of the nastiest series of political debacles followed upon the ascendancy of Marxist thought. Indeed, so prominent has neo-Marxist theory become in contemporary America that most people do not recognize how intimately it is woven into the details of their thinking. Today, it often seems natural to believe that complete equality is the normal human condition. Although no one alive has ever experienced a world from which status differences have been banished, there is a widespread assumption that, not only is this possible, but optimal. Anything less is believed to be oppressive. What is ignored in this utopian romanticizing is that the notion of complete equality is an intellectual invention. In real life, human beings always sort themselves into hierarchical arrangements. They never treat everyone as possessing the identical power. Nevertheless, philosophers have been conjecturing about social equivalence for centuries. Karl Marx was not alone in positing a completely egalitarian society. In the predestined dictatorship of the proletariat of which he wrote, everyone would have complete freedom to do whatever he or she wished. No one would be in charge because no one would be motivated to exploit anyone else. A property-less state could not support interpersonal envy. Indeed, interpersonal jealousies were said to be a corruption of historical imperatives.
The trouble was that these egalitarian imperatives are wholly imaginary. There never was, nor ever will be, the sort of communist utopia of which Marx dreamed. Unless human biology changes, real people will always create, and maintain, social hierarchies. They will forever compete with one another to determine relative power. More troublesome still is that people have actually attempted to implement Marx’s musings. Revolutionaries have sought to impose extreme concepts of leveling, often by means of coercion. Then, when their targets resisted, as they inevitably do, they resorted to violence. Book learning was translated into the brutal deaths of millions of hapless innocents. The chronicles of these atrocities are well documented, but lest it be imagined that gulag-based tyrannies are confined to far-away dominions, political correctness has found a home on the western shores of the Atlantic. Self-styled progressives routinely castigate people for failing to be tolerant of interpersonal differences. Berated as “judgmental,” these holdouts are told that it is immoral to believe that some people are better than others. Even children are instructed that competition is evil; that striving to defeat others is uncivilized. The young may giggle in triumph at being able to survive the thrust and parry of dodge ball, but they are reprimanded by progressives for being callous. Winning is alleged to be wicked. It is said to damage the self-esteem of the losers. Yet were this philosophy to become dominant—which thankfully it will not—human beings would become so passive as to expire from a want of motivation. Even coral polyps are prepared to fight for a patch of rock upon which to engage in filter feeding. Were people to do less, they would starve to death. Unable to distinguish theoretical suppositions from real world limitations, they would lack the competence to acquire a balanced diet.
If all of this sounds overwrought in a nation like the United States where a capitalistic marketplace is firmly entrenched, it must be recognized that academic neo-Marxism has made dangerous inroads. Among the worst of its manifestations have been the demands of radical feminism. Most people, to be sure, do not identify feminism with Marxism. They believe that the former is merely an expression of democratic aspirations. The goal is simply to endow women with an equal opportunity for success. Nonetheless extreme feminism is Marxist. Its commitment to androgyny is directly traceable to collectivist ideologues, including Marx and his colleague Friedrich Engels. Androgyny is the belief that there should be no differences between men and women. Gender, except in its strictly sexual dimensions, is said to have been imposed on society by a male hegemony. Desirous of exploiting the efforts of their physically weaker sisters, men have imposed a division of labor so as to dominate the choice occupations. Far more preferable would be a fifty/fifty split in which everything is equally divided. In a truly democratic world, half of all CEOs would be women and half of all nursery school teachers men. Never mind that men, on average, are more competitive than women or that women, on average, are more nurturing than men. Fait is fair, irrespective of personal desires.

In reality, the unexamined, bookish conviction that gender disparities are a myth would condemn both men and women to tasks they despise. It would deny each gender the choice of its preferred occupations based solely upon the theoretical superiority of gender parity. Most people, if they keep their eyes open, eventually notice that there are differences between men and women. Sooner or later they realize that neither the abilities, nor the interests, of the sexes are exactly the same. Men are, in fact, on average,
more aggressive and women more relationship oriented. These are simple truths that can only be denied by endorsing academic theories over homely realities. To insist that men and women are exactly the same in the face of voluminous counter-evidence is not democratic. To force them into jobs they would not voluntarily choose is not egalitarian. It is, in fact, totalitarian—very much in the mold of the Soviet Union when it attempted to impose communism on the Russian people. Radical feminism, for all its posturing as the guardian of women’s rights, is oblivious to actual human relationships. To portray all men as potential rapists and all women as helpless victims is the sort of intellectual conceit that only well-educated persons, persons who are not always comfortable with mundane realities, can embrace. It is not a manifestation of genuine knowledge or professionalized expertise.

**B.S. Detectors**

The truth is not always easy to determine. Fact and fiction are often so intertwined that fantasies can masquerade as realities without being debunked. This makes it possible for some people to manipulate others by convincing them that appearances are actualities. What are essentially lies are peddled as fundamental truths that, it is implied, can be ignored only at one’s peril. When this occurs, it is possible to be maneuvered into doing what is diametrically opposed to one’s interests. Unscrupulous charlatans acquire power by fooling people into collaborating in their own defeat. The best defense against this sort of manipulation is what may be called a B.S. detector. A self-directed expert must possess a kind of radar that identifies nonsense before it can do significant damage. Those worthy of being designated professionals must be able to distinguish fabrications from facts. To be genuine experts, they have to be able to
recognize truths when they encounter them. But this also entails an ability to recognize
untruths when they appear on the horizon. Those who are too naïve to separate the sheep
of truth from the goats of illusion are vulnerable to external control. Instead of being
capable of self-motivation, they are subject to covert influence by more sophisticated, if
less principled, manipulators. The question thus becomes, how does a would-be
professional gain the experience to tell truth from fiction?

When I was a small boy, I enjoyed chasing birds around my grandfather Simon’s
backyard. Sometimes he sat under a tree monitoring my futile efforts with bemused
satisfaction. Many more times than once he would spring up with a broad smile on his
face to instruct me on a better technique. The trick, he explained, was to put salt on the
bird’s tail. All you needed to do was sneak up with a saltshaker and sprinkle a few grains
before it flew off. Somewhat confused by this advice, I was not sure if I was being told
the truth. It was difficult to imagine how salt would prevent a bird from flying away.
Meanwhile my grandfather would chuckle at my bewilderment. He would then get more
specific, physically demonstrating how the deed was to be accomplished. If my mother
were present, I might run to her for clarification. Was grandpa just fooling me, or was
there a bird-catching procedure I had failed to grasp? It had not yet occurred to me that if
you were close enough to put salt on a bird’s tail you were close enough to grab it.
Hemmed in by my own inexperience, I could not be certain that what was intended was a
joke. Yet my very uncertainty entertained my grandfather; my gullibility certified that I
was still a child.

Naiveté is not a virtue—at least not for adults. Part of growing up is developing
an expertise about the human condition. The more one learns, either formally or
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informally, the more accurate one’s judgments are supposed to be. To innocently accept whatever one is told is to be a buffoon. It is to be a simpleton who knows so little about life that others may need to protect him from himself. Nevertheless, the knowledge needed to distinguish fact from manipulation can be hard-won. It frequently derives from the school of hard knocks. As is sometimes said: Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me. Having once been taken in by a clever ruse, it is up to each of us to learn from the experience and refuse to be taken in a second time.

Yet in real life, lessons regarding deception can be painful. Such was the case when I first arrived at Kennesaw State University. I had been hired on the assumption that I would be teaching clinical sociology. This was my specialty and I intended to expand upon it. Those who were responsible for recommending me for the position, that is, the members of the departmental search committee, assured me that they intended to pursue a major in this area of studies. The problem was that the dean did not share their enthusiasm. He politely listened as I elaborated upon my plans and smiled in what I thought was dignified agreement. Later on, after I had begun teaching, I brought him a preliminary timetable for pursuing a clinical program. Once more he smiled and encouraged me to proceed. It was not until days later, when I conferred with a colleague about these matters, that I learned this was his managerial style. He was in the habit of encouraging his subordinates to pursue projects he did not intend to endorse. From his perspective, this kept them out of trouble and out of his hair. At first, I was miffed. I felt betrayed. Then I realized that had I simply taken him at his word, I might have expended years of effort on a dead end. Fortunately, by this point in my career I knew enough to
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separate what was said from what was done. This enabled me to shift the focus of my labors along more productive lines.

Nowadays interpersonal deception has been raised to an art form, especially in politics. Politicians repeatedly make assertions they know are untrue. Affecting sincerity and a deep concern for the social welfare of others, operatives on both sides of the liberal/conservative divide say whatever they believe will be persuasive. Nowadays this disinformation is called spin and it floods the airwaves. Not just political advertisements, but news programs are awash with slanted commentary. Typically two talking heads with diametrically opposed opinions insult each other as they strive to convince viewers their own side is correct. If one so-called expert insists that the American incursion into Iraq has protected us from homegrown terrorism, the other claims the reverse. Or, if the question is the efficacy of the minimum wage, one maintains that raising the rate lifts the poor out of poverty, whereas the other, with equal fervor, maintains that it throws millions out of work. Besides, as every Republican knows, Bill Clinton was an egregious liar; while, as every Democrat realizes, George W. Bush is a congenital liar. Both sides claim to believe in democracy, but show a demagogic zeal for manipulating the electorate in directions they find congenial.

In the media, this sort of political bias has become the norm. Once upon a time editorials were primarily confined to the editorial page, but this was during a more innocent era. Today’s journalists have axes to grind, which they attempt to disguise under a veneer of objective reporting. Professing to be too professional to distort their wares, they make editorial decisions designed to promote their personal views. Are these journalists in favor of affirmative action, then they run stories that demonstrate the evils
of institutionalized racism. Do they personally hate the violence of the Iraqi war, then they ship home footage of damage done by car bombs, but not the reconstruction of the Iraqi infrastructure. A Dan Rather could, on more than one occasion, proclaim that he was unbiased. Indeed he could do this even as he introduced forged evidence critical of Bush’s National Guard service. To compound this predisposition, Rather studiously avoided an examination of the swift boat veteran’s charges against Bush’s opponent, John Kerry. Viewers who took Rather’s prejudice at face value could easily draw the wrong conclusions. They might believe, for instance, that Kerry was smarter than Bush, as was presumably documented by his better performance while an undergraduate at Yale. In fact, it was Bush who had the superior grade point average. Listeners, who did not approach these assertions with a personal B.S. detector were subject to exploitation. Instead of exercising an independent judgment, they might be induced to adopt the opinions of others of whom they were not suitably skeptical.

Indeed, the sort of hyperbole peddled by political spin-meisters saturates both public and private communications. A desire to win, or at least to influence communal attitudes, leads people to exaggerate what they believe, while simultaneously dismissing what they do not. Because unbiased facts are generally in short supply, people put forward alleged facts carefully vetted to make the desired point. People, in short, engage in self-promotion. They eagerly publicize their strengths, while disguising their weaknesses. Like couples on first dates, they regale others with tales of personal triumph, yet they fail to mention embarrassing fiascos. People do the same for the positions they advocate. If they have a pet project, they describe its virtues in glowing terms. It is not only a better idea than sliced bread, but will make us healthier, wealthier,
and wiser. Hollywood flacks regularly engage in the verbal transmutation of dross into gold. Some years ago, there as a particularly aggressive advertising campaign on behalf of a film called *The Wild, Wild West*. An updated version of a successful television show, it was hailed as the most entertaining movie of the year. Everywhere one looked, one encountered effusive praise of the film’s intelligence, creativity, and excitement. Then the motion picture was released and it plummeted into obscurity. By all accounts a turkey of the first magnitude, it could not live up to an over-the-top marketing effort. In the end, only those gullible enough to believe the hype lost their money buying tickets.

Some years ago the economist Herbert Simon won a Nobel Prize for explaining why it is almost impossible to be certain of what is best. Decision-makers, as he demonstrated, find that complex issues rarely yield to simple solutions. The real world is so convoluted and its intersecting causal chains so impenetrable that those who claim impeccable answers are usually wrong. According to Simon, managers typically choose between competing options without understanding the full range of alternatives. Nor can they be certain about the long-term effects of their options. Instead, they depend upon the available information and make the most reasonable choice based on this. Later, if a decision turns out wrong, they attempt to fix what is broken. In the meantime, they cannot sound uncertain. If they are too candid in expressing doubts, others are apt to follow more confident-sounding rivals. Indeed, this business of loudly touting the virtues of one’s position is not only prospective, but retrospective. Even after a decision has been implemented, it may still be unclear as to what was best. Since other options might have proved more effective—but were never attempted—it is impossible to know. This, however, does not prevent would-be leaders from asserting that events validate their
assessment. They will claim that they were right, with or without evidence to substantiate this. Thus, Barack Obama loudly claimed that his stimulus package saved millions of jobs—whether or not these could be documented. Were he to have abstained from doing so, he would have risked being written off as ineffectual. On the other hand, would-be leaders who reflexively accept the hyperbolic assertions of competitors are unlikely to put forward successful alternatives.

In actuality, the degree to which ordinary people are fooled by symbolic manipulations can be breathtaking. Eavesdrop on the goings on among teenagers and you discover that, in order to remain a member in good standing of the in-crowd, they participate in chain letters, even though these are Ponzi schemes. Nor do they consult medical science before being persuaded to wear a copper bracelet to protect themselves from cancer and other assorted ills. In this, they are following the time-honored pattern of patent medicine customers. A little razzle-dazzle and a few immoderate promises and they are sold. Yet their elders are frequently as naïve. Although ostensibly confident in their adult prudence, they too are swept along by communal enthusiasms. If a significant enough number of authorities repeat a seductive untruth with sufficient passion, millions of listeners cease asking embarrassing questions and join the throng. This has evidently been the case with regard to the environmental movement. When I was a youngster the conventional wisdom warned of an impending ice age. Media gurus portentously explained that the earth was cooling and that the glaciers would soon be advancing. In recent years, this concern has been replaced by fears of global warming. While the data does show a small up-tick in average temperatures, these increases have not been consistent. Nor is it clear whether they are due to industrial pollution or natural cycles.
This, however, has not prevented environmental activists from predicting disaster. Nor has it prevented them from demanding dramatic changes in economic regulations such as cap-and-trade. That these might precipitate enormous financial reverses strikes them as irrelevant. They forget that a few short decades ago their predecessors were predicting the demise of virgin forests due to acid rain. These Cassandra’s too would have shut down industrial operations for the sake of atmospheric purity. Of course, as subsequent events proved, this was unnecessary and probably would have been destructive.

Advocacy groups have a way of disseminating half-truths. In order to gain a hearing, they distort the existing data. This is not only the case with Marxists and environmentalists, but with most organized social movements. Radical feminists provide a classic illustration. For decades they have touted androgyny as a sure cure for economic injustice. Over and over again, they assert that women earn a fraction of what men do for performing the same work. The precise numbers vary, but these are always large enough to make their demands seem prudent. Nevertheless, the figures they cite are invariably wrong. Though they assert that the gender differences are for identical jobs, they are not. Such differences as do exist depend on the fact that men and women tend not to perform the same tasks. When what the genders do is statistically equated, the differences in income disappear. Thus one of the reasons men make more is that they engage in more dangerous jobs. Another reason is that they are more likely to work longer hours. Once these factors are taken into consideration, there are many jobs in which women earn more—such as advertising director. Ironically, when the electorate is persuaded that legislation is required to protect women from exploitation, voters are
manipulated into tipping the scales away from fairness. They are conned into doing what may not be in their own interests.

The same sort of alchemy occurs with respect to educational policy. Instead of acting as responsible experts who carefully assess the impact of their choices, ordinary people can be stampeded by emotional appeals grounded in deception. Teachers unions have long insisted that smaller classes are essential for quality teaching. They assert that individualized instruction improves academic outcomes. Nevertheless, this allegation is not based on dispassionate research. Actually, as should be evident even to casual onlookers, there is a flaw in the union’s argument. Although the number of students per classroom has dramatically decreased over time, this has not been accompanied by improvements in achievement testing. Most students are not doing better than their parents’ generation despite the massive resources channeled into educational institutions. So why has the public not caught on? Apparently most people believe what they want to believe. They do not detect B.S., because they are not looking for B.S. Far from acting the part of professionalized experts, they passively accept ineptitude when it is packaged in attractive wrappings. Content to wallow in reassuring fantasies, they do not even seek to improve that which is capable of improvement. Instead of taking the time to learn what would work better, they gratefully accept appeals to their customary biases

**Personal Archaeology**

One of today’s most dangerous mythologies suggests that technological advancements automatically make us more comfortable. Recent scientific breakthroughs have been so spectacular that an uncritical allegiance to hi-tech solutions appears sensible. Computers, the Internet, and cell phones capture our attention to such an extent
that we cheerfully bestow confidence in the visions of their creators. It would seem to follow from this that the most crucial knowledge for middle class success is technical knowledge. Those who understand the sciences are presumably capable of making the best choices. The hard sciences may seem tedious to a majority of people, but paradoxically this increases their authority. Because their difficulty discourages a close examination of the credentials of technocrats, their pronouncements tend to be accepted on faith. Yet this too is a mistake. Once, not long ago, it was assumed that every child needed to be indoctrinated in computer programming. In order to utilize the new-fangled machines sitting on their desks, they would have to become experts in preparing these gizmos for the personalized tasks they would be called on to perform. But this did not come to pass. What occurred instead was that a relatively small number of computer experts created user-friendly programs that less computer literate consumers could employ without having to learn Boolean algebra.

As our techno-commercial society has become more complex, the need for scientific whizzes has not been eliminated, but neither has this come to dominate occupational requirements. The situation is analogous to that which happened in agriculture and is presently occurring in industry. As farm machinery became more effective, the number of farmers needed to produce the food for a larger population did not swell. What occurred instead was that a smaller number generated greater surpluses. The same process is currently taking place in the manufacturing sector. With the advent of automation, fewer factory hands are needed to fabricate a greater volume of cheaper products. Much to the vexation of industrial unionists, a larger proportion of workers are now engaged in the service and distribution trades. There are today more doctors and
nurses, more bankers and insurance agents, more salespersons and educators. In short, additional millions are working with people and data—rather than things. If these folks are to be successful, they need social rather than technical skills. In order to be leaders, they must possess interpersonal, rather than mechanical, dexterity.

If the central competence of the upper middle class is self-direction, then the crucial advantage necessary for interpersonal success is less likely to be technological wizardry. The most important knowledge would-be professionals can incorporate is not about physics, or biology, but of our human and social natures. Scientific literacy remains functional, yet it cannot substitute for interpersonal literacy. The crucial question thus becomes how do people obtain the requisite expertise. How do they learn about the human dimension of what they do so that they can become more skillful interpersonal decision-makers? Perhaps unexpectedly, the place they must begin is with themselves. If they are to understand how others operate, they have to start by understanding themselves. Actually, it should not be so surprising that self-direction originates in self-knowledge. Those who would make knowledgeable choices must understand the springs of these choices. If they are to be self-motivated, they must recognize the origins of their personal motives. To stumble forward without this sort of awareness is to be ignorant of where one is going—or why. It is to make decisions in the dark and hence forced to live with the consequences of willful blindness.

If genuine knowledge results from an interaction of theory and practice, the same interface applies to personal knowledge. Information derived from books must be validated by checking it against reality, but so must what people believe about themselves. They have to be prepared to dig into the remote origins of their unique goals
and private bugaboos, if they are to understand who they are. Human beings are not automated decision makers. They do not mechanically process binary data to produce infallible outcomes. The conclusions they reach are decided, in large part, by mental programs incorporated when they were young. If they do not understand these and how they distort contemporary judgments, they are fated to be poor decision-makers. Moreover, unless they possess the courage to confront emotional guidelines laid down long ago, these will trap them in ineptitude as effectively as if they were bound in manacles. A century ago Sigmund Freud warned that psychological defenses prevent us from reaching logical conclusions. This admonition remains as valid today as then. Decision-makers in the throes of denial remain a danger to themselves and others. They cannot possibly be expert in what they do not perceive.

The counsel that self-knowledge is the beginning of wisdom is not of recent vintage. “Know thyself” is a hoary philosophical cliché. Once upon a time this aphorism was purveyed primarily to the children of the social elite. Nowadays it is more broadly applicable because more individuals participate in decentralized decision-making. Yet oddly, the tools for obtaining this knowledge remain in disrepute. Freud, when discussing what was required, alluded to a need for “personal archeology.” He advised those reclining on his couch to dig into their personal histories much as an anthropologist might burrow into the foundations of a long buried city. Little by little, piece by piece, they were required to brush the dust off of long ago feelings and memories. Gradually, these various parts would fit together into a discernable pattern. Almost imperceptibly, it would become apparent why a person felt compelled to behave in ways that made no sense. It was only then that he or she would be free to choose whether to continue
pursuing what had become customary. Only then could decisions be rationalized according to contemporary events.

As insightful as this was, Freud corrupted his vision by attaching it to psychiatry. The people he helped were labeled “patients.” In other words, in order to come to him for assistance in discovering one’s inner self, it was first necessary to admit to being sick. Although his clients were not psychotic, they had to be content with the designation of neurotic. Nonetheless, this too implied that they were defective. It further suggested that an expedition into one’s unconscious was reserved for individuals who were abnormal. Who then would wish to engage in personal archeology? Who would be comfortable with questions about their relationship with their parents? Certainly not those who hoped to become social leaders. Especially not those who hoped to engage in social mobility. To admit up front to being defective was tantamount to admitting that one lacked the personal qualities required of a person of character. It implied that only the seriously troubled could benefit from being made conscious of their deepest aims.

In fact, even normal people possess hidden motives. Even they develop psychological defenses in the process of growing up. This should not be a matter of embarrassment. It is definitely not an indicator of an inferior personality. If anything, the willingness, and capacity, to uncover sensitive truths is a sign of emotional strength. It demonstrates an internal integrity well suited to self-direction. Indeed, personal archeology need not be associated with psychotherapy. A detailed self-knowledge should not be dependent upon an alleged, and often imaginary, infirmity. What is needed instead is the normalization of self-discovery. Institutions, both formal and informal, have to be geared to encouraging this sort of knowledge. Whether they enter professional
counseling, discuss their childhoods with their spouses, or become introspective
bibliophiles, would-be professionalized selves need to be active seekers after internal
truths.

This quest would not have appealed to my father. He believed that psychotherapy
was for crazy people. Adamantly opposed to introspection, he never discussed the
circumstances of his youth with anyone. Nor did he spend hours privately reviewing his
past. When, in the midst of a mid-life crisis, he sought medical help, the only sort of
assistance he would accept was a prescription for tranquilizers. In the end, not long
before he died, he, with some chagrin, admitted that I understood him better than he
understood himself. My father, it must be stressed, was a very intelligent man, but, given
his blue-collar origins, he averted his eyes from uncomfortable personal issues. One of
these was revealed by a family health crisis—not his own but my mother’s. Sometime in
her fifties, the doctors informed her that she had developed diabetes. This was difficult
for her to accept, but its effect on him was devastating. Upon hearing the news, he threw
a tantrum. Stomping around their condominium shouting at the top of his lungs, he
insisted that this was inconceivable. How could he have a wife who suffered from
diabetes? He would not allow it.

What he was barely able to acknowledge, in part because he had not thought
about for years, was that this reaction derived from his relationship with his mother.
Grandma Flora also suffered from diabetes. So serious was her condition that during her
latter years she was confined to a sick bed. Even when she was younger, that is, when
her children were small, she barely had the strength to do housework. Instead, her
children were compelled to cook and serve their own meals. They were, in a word, the
victims of parental neglect. It was the recollection of this emotional abandonment that drove my father to distraction. One of the things he most valued from his wife is that she fed him. Over the years, day after day, she diligently prepared the meals he preferred. Now that she too was sick would this mean that he was once more on his own? This was so anxiety provoking that he did not recognize the medical advances that would enable her to maintain a normal lifestyle. Unable to review the sources of his distress, he could not measure these against the current reality so as to make appropriate decisions about how to respond.

In this inability to assess the sources of his motivation my father was not, and is not, alone. In some cases, this incapacity is benign. With my bother, it took a while for him to recognize the explanation of his fascination with innovative gadgets. Why did he feel compelled to be the first in the neighborhood to purchase the latest technological gizmo? The reason turned out to be simple. When he was small, my sister and I showered him with gifts. Roughly a decade younger than the two of us, we plied him with the toys that we wished we had received when we were his age. These were how we demonstrated our love. Years later, as an adult, toys still felt like an expression of love to him. Thus, when in need of comfort, he bought his own. A failure to understand this did not place him in jeopardy; it merely left him ignorant of the basis of his obsession. I too required years to understand why I made the occupational choices I did. For me, this began by remembering that my father’s highest aspiration was to be a successful businessman. Devoted to his own father, he developed a hero-worship for grandpa Joseph’s achievements. The idea of being a prosperous entrepreneur, not necessarily in the candy store trade, but something more prestigious, struck him as the epitome of adult
accomplishment. The problem was that he did not possess the temperament for such an
enterprise. Much too angry to propitiate demanding customers, he failed miserably when
he opened a retail outlet of his own. No, it would have to be his son who completed this
ambition. It was I who would have to become the successful businessman. This then
was the circumstance against which I reacted. When my father insisted that I pursue a
business-oriented profession, I responded by resisting as steadfastly as I could. If there
was anything I would not be, it was a businessman. I would not be so crass as to pursue a
career dedicated to the accumulation of wealth. I would do something more high-
minded; perhaps in the helping professions; perhaps in academia.

Others, of course, have endured more serious consequences from a failure to
engage in successful introspection. Had Miriam understood the consequences of being
raised by an alcoholic father and a religiously repressed mother, she might not have had
to undergo the tribulations of breaking free from a religious cult. During her transition to
adulthood, she might have made different choices. One can also imagine that Adolf
Hitler, had he been more conscious of the nature his conflicts with his father, might have
been less inclined to act out his revenge by presiding over the death of millions. The
same applies to Joseph Stalin. Had he not resented his parents for sending him to study
for the priesthood, he might never have become the high priest of communism. Instead
of praising his mother for a loving nature he did not believe she possessed, he might have
cared enough to attend her funeral. Even Richard Nixon might have avoided disgrace
had he a better grasp of his internal motives. Rather than mawkishly eulogize his mother
upon being ejected from office, were he less suspicious of others he might never have
committed the acts that led to Watergate. Had he better understood the dynamics of his
parents’ marriage and how he was triangulated between them, he might have become a
different sort of person.

A particularly poignant example of the consequences of abstaining from personal
archeology is provided by the career of Alfred Kinsey. As America’s pioneering sex
researcher, Kinsey is known for his courageous explorations into one of the most
sensitive areas of human conduct. With a boldness few others have been able to muster,
he flew in the face of convention to ask thousands of subjects about the intimate details of
their sexuality. The irony—and it is an enormous irony—is that he was never able to do
the same for the details of his own childhood. Sex, during his period, was the third rail of
interpersonal conduct. To touch it was to risk instant electrocution; that is, immediate
professional suicide. Kinsey knew this, but he persevered nevertheless. In fact, the
immolation he feared most was that delving into his relationship with his parents. This
was the subject he avoided at all costs. It was a topic he adamantly refused to discuss.
Others found him peculiarly remote and professorial when these issues arose. This was
often attributed to the personal peculiarities associated with being a world-class scholar.
The truth was that it had to do with the way he was raised.

Kinsey’s father was a hard-nosed disciplinarian. Unless his children did things
the right way, that is, the way he decreed, he would subject them to scathing criticism.
As his oldest son, Alfred was expected to live up to particularly high standards. His
father had risen to teach a non-academic subject at the Steven’s Institute of Technology,
but did so without the benefit of a college education. His son was pressed to do better.
This led to melodramatic clashes from which Kinsey’s mother was largely absent.
Herself committed to being compliant, she recommended the same strategy to her son.
She certainly did not defend him against his father. Alfred’s response was to become a model child. A wonderful student and a paragon of adolescent comportment, for a long while he seemed comfortable becoming what he was supposed to be. This, however, was misleading. Like most teenagers, Kinsey had sexual needs. He was not, for instance, supposed to masturbate, but did so anyway. He also seems to have had homosexual longings, but given the contemporary suppression of homosexuality, these could not be explored, never mind expressed. Kinsey’s solution was to masturbate, but to do so in private. Not only did he masturbate, he did so in a masochistic manner. He literally thrust a sharpened hairbrush up his urethra as he performed the deed. As his chief biographer suggests, this was probably a form of self-punishment for breaking the rules. Sadly, it did not deter rule-breaking, and because it did not, instigated ever more savage forms of penance.

No wonder that as an adult Kinsey became fascinated with studying sexuality. No wonder too that he was fascinated with sexual deviance. If there was an underlying theme to his work, it was that sexual repression was regrettable. For their mental well-being, people had to be encouraged to engage in sexual release. Not surprisingly, those highest on his list to be sexually liberated were homosexuals. Thus his surveys of American sexual habits portray same-sex intimacy as both common and normal. So broad did he cast his net that he found it impossible to condemn pedophilia. One of his most notorious informants was a pedophile who elaborated upon the minutiae of his contacts with children. Kinsey not only passed this testimony along almost verbatim, he implicitly endorsed the view that the man’s victims enjoyed being abused. They, and not just the adult pedophile, sought this dubious pastime. In this, Kinsey seems to have been
doing nothing less than promoting sexual exploitation. Would he have done the same had he better understood the foundations of his sexuality? Would he have been as insensitive to the sexual vulnerabilities of the young had he been more sensitive to the sexual dilemmas of his youth? In any event, there can be little doubt that Kinsey would have been a better scientist had he been able to explore the central instrument with which he conducted his research—namely himself. Good judgment, including scientific judgment, is difficult to exercise when it is employed in ignorance of the pressures impinging upon it.

Lastly, personal archeology can be crucial to evaluating one’s personal strengths and weaknesses. No one is equally competent at everything. Some of the disparities in our social performances owe to inherited talents, while others flow from the peculiarities of our upbringings. I, for instance, am terrible at basketball. Short, and unable to jump, I was not born with the requisite physical endowments. But neither did I hone my skills through hours of practice. Certain that this would not be an area of personal excellence, I neglected improving upon it. The upshot was that a confluence nature and nurture closed off a career in the NBA. In these particulars, my situation may be unique, but similar considerations apply to all of us. Where each of us ends up in life is always, to some extent, guided by where we began. The more familiar we are with our childhoods the better prepared we are to make appropriate choices down the road. In knowing ourselves, we gain a better understanding of what we can handle and what we cannot. As a result, we are liable to make fewer errors.
Chapter 5

A Piece of the Action

Who’s on First?

The routine was known as “Who’s on first?” and it made Bud Abbott and Lou Costello famous. As their most celebrated comedy bit, they performed it for decades, almost always to appreciative audiences. Bud would begin by mentioning that he had a baseball team and Lou would follow up by inquiring into its composition. His first question was the obvious one, that is, “Who’s on first?” To this Bud would respond in the affirmative. “Yes, Who’s on first.” At this, Lou would express confusion. “Yes” was not the appropriate answer. The question was after all: “Who’s on first?” Since the name of the player was “who,” Bud continued to answer affirmatively. Eventually Lou would change his phraseology and ask, “What’s on first?” To this Bud would reply, “No, Watt’s on second.” Subsequent to this, the mix-ups multiplied. Eventually the pair moved on to discussing third base where the player’s name was “I Don’t Know.” At no point, however, were they able to identify the source of their misunderstandings. Neither was able to distinguish between a person’s name and the role that person played. Of course, had Bud responded to Lou’s initial query by saying, “the guy, whose unusual name happens to be Who, is our first baseman” the routine would never have gotten off the ground. Costello would immediately have known what was meant.

Most Americans have little difficulty in understanding what it means to be a first baseman. They are familiar with the fact that in the game of baseball fielders occupy different positions and that these positions are associated with the performance of a variety of specific tasks. What a first baseman does is different from what a second
baseman does, which is further differentiated from what a third baseman does, and so forth. The players are organized according to a division of labor upon which an efficient defense against the opposition depends. If any of these infielders is out of position, or incompetent at his specialty, the other side is liable to score several unearned runs. Thus, the first baseman is supposed to be skilled at catching balls thrown to him by the other infielders. His doing so, while simultaneously keeping a heel on the base, is the way most outs are recorded. This places a premium on the first baseman being tall and left-handed. These attributes enable him to be a foot closer to the thrown ball, which can produce a fractional advantage in beating the runner to the base. This combination also tends to produce a powerful player who is generally a potent hitter. In my youth Gil Hodges, the Brooklyn Dodger first baseman, exemplified the ideal.

Although I was an avid Dodger fan, and Hodges was a personal hero, I had no chance of emulating his game-winning feats. Since I was short and right-handed, another position would have to do. My spot was usually second base. This location required good lateral movement, but neither a strong arm nor a particularly potent bat. A second baseman did have to have good agility, nevertheless the throwing distance to either the shortstop or first base was not prohibitive. Moreover, being a singles hitter would do at the plate. In any event, I could handle these demands. I could catch ground balls and pivot quickly to the right or left. Third base, however, would have been another story. In baseball, third is known as the hot corner. Because most batters are right handed, when they pull the ball it is often directly, and with considerable velocity, at the third baseman. As a result, third basemen must enjoy exceptional reflexes. They do not have to have great foot speed, but must react quickly. They are also required to possess an especially
strong arm. Since the distance between third and first is longer than between second and first, getting the ball there on time for a putout is contingent upon a swift and accurate throw. No wonder that third basemen are celebrated for their powerful arms.

Catchers, to consider one last position, are neither fast, nor do most boast unusually strong throwing arms. Mostly crouched behind home plate ready to receive the pitcher’s next offering, their specialty does not necessitate speed. While they have to be able to throw the ball to second in time to tag out potential base stealers, this is more a matter of anticipation than arm strength. Catchers, however, must be well versed in the strategic aspects of the game. While the other players need to understand the best place to be positioned for different hitters and on-base configurations, the catcher is usually required to call for specific pitches. To do this well, he has to have a head for the tactical duel between the batter and pitcher. The pitcher’s strengths and weakness, the batter’s hitting tendencies, the current score and inning, and the sequence of previous pitches must all be factored into deciding whether to signal for a curveball low and away or a fastball up and in. Catchers are field generals in a way that first baseman are not. As a consequence, the occupants of these roles think and look differently.

If all of this sounds too elementary to linger over, it is because the concept of a social division of labor is so familiar. The idea of particular people being matched up with particular roles is normal; hence it typically goes without saying. Put another way, we human beings exhibit so universal a propensity for dividing complex tasks into coordinated patterns of interrelated jobs is as to seem unremarkable. Yet it is remarkable, and more than this, it is pregnant with consequence. Mosquitoes, as opposed to ants, do not feature a complex division of labor. Each mosquito does more or less what every
other mosquito does. As a result, they do not create the complex tunnel systems or underground gardens of which ants are capable. A similar distinction can be drawn between tigers and people. Tigers are marvelous hunters, but lone hunters. As good as they are, and as strong as they are, they cannot bring down elephants in the way human beings can. Nor do they erect feline cities or send tiger astronauts into outer space.

There is, nevertheless, an important distinction between human and insect divisions of labor. Insects are more dependent upon instinct than humans. Whether an individual worker ant will be occupied in feeding the larvae or defending the tunnel entrance from intruders is more contingent upon hard-wired biological switching systems than whether an individual human becomes a nursery school teacher or a cab driver. For people, who winds up performing which job is decided more by social learning than hormonal triggers. As a consequence, human divisions of labor are more flexible and more open to complex evolutionary processes than those of social insects.

This said, human beings are not completely free agents. People cannot organize their activities anyway they please. Despite periodic suggestions that societies can be rearranged in whatever manner reformers imagine, this is not true. Social engineers like to believe that they can reconstruct our communal architecture along supremely efficient and fair-minded lines, nonetheless they cannot. Although we humans are not as subject to inviolable constraints as communal insects, we too are biological creatures with biologically imposed pre-conditions. Our divisions of labor may not be built into our genes, but a tendency to create them is. While how we decide to partition various tasks is not predetermined, the means through which we make these determinations is. This ensures that the realization coordinated divisions of labor are more efficient than social
isolation need not independently arise in each succeeding generation. People became social animals—not along the lines of herd animals, but more akin to wolf packs—long ago. Indeed, working on cooperative enterprises with the various parties delegated discrete assignments is part of what allowed our physically puny ancestors to become the dominant carnivores on our planet.

The instinctive dimensions of our role behavior are on display when children play House. No one teaches youngsters to engage in this pastime. It is something they spontaneously do without instruction from their parents. Or rather it is something that each cohort of children teaches the next and that the more recent one readily absorbs from the previous one. When children play House, they construct an elementary division of labor. One child is designated to play the mommy, another the daddy, and a third the baby. Then the players take turns instructing each other on the particulars of their assignments. The daddy, for instance, may be told that it is time to go to work, whereas the mommy is chided if she neglects to feed the baby. Clearly, much of what the players decide is modeled upon what they believe their elders are doing. This means that the exact nature of their roles is modified as adult roles are modified. But it is also true that children tend to be maddeningly traditional. They want the mommies to take care of the babies and the daddies to go to work even when this is not precisely what happens in their own homes. If this is the case, then the divisions of labor children construct may be based on more than custom. The biological differences between males and females may also have something to do with their choices. Either way, playing House allows children to practice the roles they may some day play, as well as to teach them how to play these
in cooperation with other role players. In so doing, they ascertain how to be role players, and also how to be role partners.

One of the most salient peculiarities of human roles is that these develop over time. Whereas once upon a time, hunter-gatherer tasks tended to be few in number and relatively narrow in execution, today’s roles have become progressively more complicated and disparate. Among our forager ancestors, the sorts of duties it might be incumbent upon a person to perform numbered in the dozens. Amongst ourselves, the extent of these has exploded into the hundreds of thousands. There are today far more specialties than there once were, many of which have become remarkably convoluted. Distinguishing between what mommies and daddies do, or even between the responsibilities of first and second basemen, is relatively simple compared with distinguishing between the duties of arbitrageurs and mechanical engineers. The question that arises is, therefore, how did these modern distinctions develop? How did the scope of role assignments grow so great or their details become so precisely defined? The answers are more than a matter of intellectual curiosity. Recognizing how the contemporary diversification evolved provides hints about what is necessary to become a self-motivated expert in an era of expanding professional responsibilities. It also suggests what needs to be learned and how this can be coordinated with the obligations of other professionals.

Individual role performances, it must be understood, follow what may be called role scripts. When a person plays a particular part, he or she does not invent the requisite behaviors from scratch. While some improvising is allowed, the general outlines of what is expected are already prescribed. Many of these prescriptions come from one’s role
partners. Teachers tell students what is expected of them as students, while students tell teachers what is required of them as teachers. More generally, role players who have already learned what is wanted demand conduct of others that connects with their own. In other words, they seek coordination by insisting on a performance that compliments their own. Just as children playing House, or baseball, instruct one another on the duties of their respective assignments, so adults, who depend on each other, cue each other as to what is needed. They literally integrate their roles by adjusting them as they go along.

All of this is essential to a division of labor that is not genetically programmed. Potentially plastic activities need to be modified so that they fit together. Yet what is even more special about social roles is that they become internalized. Role players do not always need to be prompted on how to play their parts. After a certain amount of interaction, they come to understand what is expected, then they continue perform this way because they demand it of themselves. Previously external demands have been converted into internal ones. Now the ways a person thinks, feels, and decides are modified such that he or she is guided by an internal summary of the desired behaviors. Put another way, a person’s cognitive structure, emotional reactions, and volitional inclinations have been reorganized so that he or she has become a different sort of person. His or her personal understandings, hopes and fears, and tendencies to act have all been transformed to produce conduct that does not have to be externally coerced.

A Burgeoning Division of Labor

Social roles, and the scripts that guide their performance, evolve over time. The sorts of duties required of hunter-gatherers did not transform into those of rocket scientists in the blink of an eye. Generations, and often millennia, were necessary to
accumulate the elaborate facets of a convoluted division of labor. Let us begin with a simple example. Americans are quite familiar with what is expected of the President of our country. The role of chief executive has been occupied for over two centuries; hence both the position’s occupant and ordinary citizens have acquired an acquaintance with its requirements. This was not, however, the situation when George Washington took the oath of office. He had no predecessors upon whom to lean for guidance. All he had to constrain his choices were a few directives on a piece of paper. It was he who decided how to organize his closest advisors into a kitchen cabinet; it was he who determined whether being commander-in-chief allowed him to lead an expeditionary force against the whiskey rebellion. Even something as straightforward as his title offered no precedents. Should he be called your majesty or perhaps simply your honor? In the end, despite the more ostentatious recommendations of John Adams, he became Mr. President. And so it has been ever since, with Washington’s successors no longer in a quandary as to how they should be addressed. They are content to be regarded as no more the first among equals because Washington many years earlier found this status congenial.

Another role pioneer was Thomas Alva Edison. Most of us are familiar with Edison’s many inventions. We honor him for bequeathing us the electric light, the phonograph, and moving pictures. Less well appreciated is that he also invented the business of inventing. Sometimes we imagine Edison’s discoveries as owing either to genius or serendipity. Yet his was a disciplined genius and a carefully planned serendipity. Edison himself claimed that his success depended more upon perspiration than inspiration. Yes, he happened upon a practical filament for the electric bulb, but only after arduously, and systematically, testing many hundreds of candidates. If today
there are fewer inventors cut from Edison’s clothe, it is partially because he domesticated the search for technical innovations. In intentionally seeking solutions to predetermined problems, he provided a model for subsequent research. The contemporary role of research scientist employed in R & D by a vast corporation, and delegated to create profitable products, derives his/her marching orders in emulation of the Wizard of Menlo Park. The kinds of jobs nowadays performed in the laboratories of giant pharmaceutical concerns and multinational energy conglomerates evolved from the demands that Edison made of his assistants and, not so incidentally, that they made of him. Their interaction was a test case for how an organized division of labor could tame the unknown.

The same sort of developmental process has applied to the traditional professions. Physicians today do what they do, not because some mastermind concocted the specialties into which they are divided, but because these areas of expertise evolved to become more complex. Physicians too follow role scripts that were only gradually composed through the interaction of multiple role partners. The technical tasks they today perform became available for internalization only after these emerged through social practice. Take the role of surgeon. This sub-specialty did not even begin as medical. The first European surgeons were barbers. As experts in the use of cutting instruments, they were called upon to sever limbs as well as hair. The current prestige of the surgical fraternity did not begin to take shape until the demands of modern warfare elevated the value, and competence, of what were previously referred to as “saw-bones.” A critical turning point in the occupation’s fortunes came during the American Civil War. The carnage created by improved firearms, combined with Napoleonic battlefield tactics, demanded that innumerable arms and legs be sliced off with assembly line efficiency. In
rising to this challenge, what began as a fraternity of semi-medical amputators developed techniques that converted them into a military asset. Because a greater number of patients survived, both the generals who needed live bodies for cannon fodder and the raw recruits who wanted to stay alive, were eager to recognize their contributions. As the role partners of this evolving discipline, their demands helped mold what surgeons became.

Closely related to this advancement was the introduction of an entirely new medical role. Part of the reason surgeons could become more skilled was that they operated on patients who were less resistant. Most people do not voluntarily remain quiescent while someone cuts into their flesh. The pain is too great. What is necessary, but only developed toward the end of the nineteenth century, is an effective anesthetic. Yet anesthesia is a tricky business. The same substances that lead to unconsciousness can, if misapplied, induce death. What is needed are specialists in producing clinical sleep, which is to say, anesthesiologists. Only a focused dedication to learning, and implementing, this proficiency produces the competence to reduce mortality. The way this is achieved is by socializing physicians (and later nurses) in the specialty and then embedding them in a medical team that demands expert performance. Anesthesiologists first learned to internalize their role scripts partly by studying scientific and technical knowledge; partly by being immersed in life and death situations; and partly by being drilled in professional norms and values. They became professional in what they did because they were both stimulated to acquire detailed knowledge and to develop emotional and volitional attachments to their craft. In time, this internal reorganization was systematized in a formal socialization process that acted as a rite of passage.
Anesthesiologists learned not only to think of themselves as physicians, but to prize their reputations as expert specialists.

A similar evolutionary course occurred within the semi-proessions. These are not as technical, nor emotionally binding, as the traditional professions, but they too have been sub-dividing and specializing. Take criminal justice. In a Gesellschaft world filled with a myriad of strangers, keeping the peace has evolved beyond the dictates of a sheriff on horseback. As policing duties became more complicated, those who entered these occupations were forced to narrow their choices. No longer was it sufficient to aspire to the part of beat cop. Indeed, many criminal justice recruits prefer to skip the physical aspects of policing. They would rather jump straight into the role of cold-case detective, criminal scene investigator, or computer crime consultant. Transfixed by the models they see on television, they internalize a romantic vision of what they believe is expected. It takes university training, in combination with on-the-job experience, to disabuse them of these fantasies. Only then are they conscripted into the actual work requirements.

This increasing stock of social roles also includes a host of unprecedented specialties. Social divisions of labor grow not only by sub-dividing traditional tasks; but by including novel assignments. A denser social landscape, kept afloat by innumerable techno-commercial innovations, requires countless skills never before exercised. The effect is to force a bevy of modern George Washingtons to decide what to do without benefit of established role models. In being required to act as no one else has previously, they invent their jobs as they go along. This has been the case with computer related occupations. Time and again, what appeared necessary was not. For instance, not long ago social prognosticators projected a burgeoning market for keypunch operators. They
assumed that ever more punch cards would be required to program room-sized calculating machines. Nor has it been long since the dot-com bubble burst. Contrary to the wild speculations of venture capitalists, it turned out that not everything can be gainfully sold on-line. Much of what emerged resulted from trial and error. A horde of clever and aggressive entrepreneurs devised an occupational panorama not even they imagined. If anything, their success is attributable to an ability to adjust to mutating demands. After all, it was Steven Jobs who recognized that the screen icons created by Xerox could be harnessed to Apple’s Macintosh operating system. And it was Jeff Bezos of Amazon.com who conjured up the idea of selling books through the Internet. Each demonstrated the mental and emotional dexterity to make alterations as needed; alterations at which others bridled.

So far, it may seem that the only social roles of significance are occupational ones. In fact, to become a professionalized self it is essential to attain a self-motivated expertise in the numerous personal roles that go along with exercising self-direction. Specialists in independent decision-making must become authorities in making the choices that flesh out their private lives. But these too have been multiplying and becoming more specialized. To cite a single, albeit a crucial example, what it means to be a spouse has been subject to rapid evolution. Today, when a man and woman marry, what is required of them is not the same as what was demanded of their grandparents. It is certainly not what was demanded of their remote ancestors. Questions about who will do the cooking cannot be answered with the solutions appropriate for when dinner was prepared in an open fireplace. Requiring a husband who arrives home from work before his wife to throw a couple of TV dinners into the microwave is not the same as
demanding that he spend a day baking the family’s bread over a wood-fired hearth. Similarly, where once a good wife was competent at darning her family’s socks, she may today be more skilled at going on-line to make purchases from a catalog service.

Social roles are far more varied than they once were. They are also more difficult to master. Nevertheless, they continue to be acquired in social interaction. To begin with, as people become more professionalized, they select from a broader assortment of preexistent specialties. Although they are not required to invent a social division of labor from nothing, their challenge lies in threading their way through a larger labyrinth of choices. They start by settling on which parts to play before attempting to incorporate the requisite skills. In time, they also learn that it is incumbent upon them to participate in the evolution of this division of labor. Social roles, and the scripts that guide them, are always being adjusted to meet unanticipated circumstances. Success in an expanding division of labor, therefore, depends upon being flexible enough to participate in this process. Becoming a competent, self-motivated role performer depends not only on internalizing the appropriate scripts, but in adjusting these as proves necessary.

What Should I Be When I Grow Up?

In a classic movie of a bygone generation, Dustin Hoffman was confronted with the eternal question of what to do when he grew up. As the title character in the film The Graduate, he was pressured into deciding upon an occupational direction. Yet as with so many of his contemporaries, this presented an insuperable dilemma. Not wanting to emulate his conventionalized parents, he was intent on becoming his own person. But where was he to turn for an answer? If he could not look toward his mother and father, neither was he inspired by the advice of their friends. His quandary was symbolized at
party intended to celebrate his college degree, when a well meaning, albeit shallow, businessman took him aside to share the secret of economic success. Hoffman was told that the solution boiled down to a single word—plastics. As the building material of the future, those devoted to it must invariably prosper. In fact, plastics have turned out to be enormously important and many fortunes have been grounded in them, but this did not solve Hoffman’s predicament. In the end, he remained as uncertain about what to become.

The ubiquity of this conundrum is on display on virtually any college campus. From coast to coast, students who were told that higher education will be their ticket to success are confronted with the problem of choosing a major. Both traditional and non-traditional students are required to concentrate on a subject that will presumably determine their employment after they graduate. So, what to do? Should they be practical and select accounting or be more intellectual and opt for philosophy? Perhaps they should study something they enjoy, but then again maybe they should choose something that will pay off with a fat paycheck? So perplexing is this choice that switching from one major to another has become normal. Worse still, students cannot be certain about what will pan out later on. From their perspective, they are in the midst of a crapshoot. Everyone else seems to have a firm opinion as to what is best, but they are less confident. Denied access to an infallible crystal ball, they are not even positive about what will be required once they enter the job market. They are not even clear about the sorts of job available.

The extent of this quandary is evident within my own department at Kennesaw State University. Of the majors that we offer, criminal justice attracts the largest
following. Many of those who enroll are already employed at local policing agencies, nevertheless the largest proportion are recent high school graduates. Of the latter, many are young women who want to do something exciting. When queried about their vocational aspirations, most coyly admit to hoping for positions as criminal profilers. They apparently envisage sitting in a comfortable office pouring over psychological data to predict who is likely to commit a particular crime. Having seen this depicted on television, they assume it is something they can do. What few realize is that there are only a handful of profilers in the entire country. Considering this, and that thousands of others on countless campuses share their aspirations, the odds of getting hired as a profiler are longer than of being struck by lightning. Nor are the prospects much better for aspirants to CSI positions. Crime scene investigators are, to be sure, more numerous, but in real life, as opposed to television dramas, these positions do not offer an opportunity to become freelance detectives. In real life, crime scene investigators are more concerned with ensuring the chain of custody of evidence than deducing its import to particular mysteries. Those students who expect one day to be hovering on the brink of astounding discoveries are destined for disappointment.

So too are the majors in other college disciplines. Among the most likely contenders for disillusionment are those who study “communications.” They too have been misled by what they see on the media. Most dream of becoming the next Katie Couric or Bill O’Reilly. They want to be stars. Their hope is to develop into celebrities whose faces are so well known that they will receive public adulation wherever they go. But here too the potential opportunities are outrun by the masses of applicants. Most communications majors will never be employed by television stations. They will never
get their faces on a network talk show or achieve a by-line on a major newspaper. Although most will find work, it is unlikely to be glamorous. They may even find what they learn in school useful for their eventual employments, but not in the manner they anticipate. The central problem is that most are woefully ignorant of the sorts of work available. They grow up in parochial environments that do not expose them to the full range of options. As a result, they find it difficult to be realistic. While they understand that they must choose, they do not know what will be best.

In fact, this is not a personal problem; it is an institutional one. A generalized occupational ignorance is not a product of individual stupidity, but of a division of labor grown so far-reaching that no one can master its full extent. There are so many different sorts of job, most of which are not visible to the young, that even when people become adults they have no way of making an informed decision. In a world where home and school are separated from the workplace, and where innumerable workplaces are estranged from other workplaces, this lack of observability cannot be surmounted. There is simply too much to be seen for most to be comprehended in advance of making a vocational choice. Not surprisingly, the typical solution is to depend on what can be ascertained. This, of course, involves what is visible within one’s immediate neighborhood, including one’s media neighborhood. For children, this often entails choosing between becoming a police officer or a truck driver. It also means aspiring to be a detective, or nowadays, a lawyer. Not only is this a limited universe, but when the alternatives derive from television or the movies, it is a simplified one. The nature of drama is such that its must be stripped down to the bare essentials. Too much detail is confusing, ergo it is left on the cutting room floor. But because what is left out gives
social roles their substance, those dependent upon media representations remain ignorant. They have to await real world experience before determining what is actually available.

As child, I too was compelled to choose from a make-believe ensemble of vocations. In my day, the choice for a boy was between being a cowboy and an Indian, or a cop and a robber. These were the games my friends and I played, and hence the highest goals to which we aspired. Some of us thought about being firemen or teachers, and for a while I toyed with the idea of becoming a rabbi, but my parents had other ambitions. At one point, my father made it plain that when asked what I was going to be, the expected answer was “an engineer.” Initially I assumed that he meant a man who drove a train. Having no experience with his activities as an electronic engineer, it could not have occurred to me what these entailed. In time, I explored the possibility of becoming a nuclear physicist, a chemist, a clinical psychologist, a vocational counselor, a newspaper reporter, a market researcher, a cab driver, a management information specialist, a welfare caseworker, and a college professor. Once embarked upon this mission, I made a myriad of unexpected discoveries, but, because the process entailed so much job switching, I assumed that this was a deep personal flaw. More solidly grounded persons surely decided upon a vocation when they were in grade school and then assiduously pursued success until they achieved it. Their occupational trajectories were linear as opposed to my befuddled zigzagging. Little did I realize, until I became a professional sociologist, that most people average seven different jobs before settling on something permanent. Nor did I understand that most job requirements are discovered in the process of performing them. It is only then that a unique expertise can be internalized.
So what is to be done if a person aspires to become a self-motivated expert? How is someone to become professionalized if it is so difficult to determine what to become? One of the secrets to which Dustin Hoffman’s character gradually became privy was the need to engage in occupational exploration. Foreclosing options merely because one wants a definitive answer is a serious error. Success within a voluminous division of labor is contingent upon taking the time to make an appropriate selection. This means not deciding upon a role because others insist upon it. Whatever one’s parents, friends, or professors recommend, they will not have to live with the choice. It is the individual—however confused he or she may be—who has to perform the role’s requirements. If he or she is unhappy with a task, the likelihood of performing it well is nil. To be a self-motivated expert, it is first necessary to be motivated to do what one will be required to do. Moreover, as should be obvious, to be competently self-directed, it is essential to make independent decisions. Those who do not care about what they are doing, i.e., those who occupy positions forced upon them, are unlikely to concentrate on what they do, worry about the results, or be pleased when they succeed. They are thus unlikely to make good choices. Yet to explore one’s options it is not only necessary to experiment; it is necessary to reject those that are unsuitable. When mistakes are made, as they often are, it is vital to cut one’s losses. Ultimately, to be both content and competent, a person must begin by being honest with him or herself. The issue is not what would please others, but what will please oneself.

Exploration also entails finding out what one is good at doing. Not only do jobs differ, so do individuals. Not everyone is good at everything. All of us possess strengths and weaknesses. The question each of us must ask is thus what is my combination of
strengths and weaknesses? It is not enough to dream of unrivaled triumphs; it is essential to possess the tools to achieve these. People who have been duped into believing they can accomplish anything they can imagine are unlikely to accomplish much of anything. In the real world, we are hemmed in by personal limitations. If we do not honor these, we are apt to succumb to defeat at the hands of more realistic competitors. The idea is to choose vocational options where our advantages are noteworthy and where our disadvantages are not debilitating. But since we do not begin this game by understanding how we stack up relative to others, this too requires exploration. Indeed, if we are less skilled than our rivals, we are unlikely to enjoy what we do. However intrinsically satisfying a task, if others perform it better, the comparison is galling. Here too honesty is crucial. Sadly, many of us turn out to be less competent than we might wish, but if we accept our actual potentials, we will be more proficient than otherwise.

Then too there is the question of opportunities. Success is not only contingent upon relative strengths and weaknesses, but also on how these match up with our possibilities. These complementarities need to be explored. In a world replete with hundreds of thousands of options, the fewer of these with which we are familiar, the worse our chances of making a good choice. No matter how sophisticated a start one receives, everyone begins with a narrow perspective. The objective is, therefore, to become more cosmopolitan; that is, to entertain prospects outside one’s immediate neighborhood. Some people think that success is a matter of luck. They assume that good things either fall into your lap or they do not. They do not understand that good fortune is often a matter of recognizing opportunities when they arise. Those whose horizons are artificially limited reduce their prospects. They fail to perceive what is
possible by confining their imaginations to what they already know. To be effectively self-directed in a world riddled with uncertainties, it is essential to explore the full expanse of one’s options. Not only what is physically present, but also what is mentally available needs to be reviewed. The issue is not only what works, but what might work.

**Who Will Be on First?**

Not everyone can be a first baseman. Successful role performances depend on more than deciding what to become. Nor do they depend solely upon who best fits a particular role. Being a first baseman is so coveted a position that there are more aspirants than can be accommodated. Among my peers being a first baseman was exceedingly popular because it meant being involved in the action. Time and again the man on first received praise for a critical putout. He was literally cheered for making the crucial catch that retired the other side. This ensured that several of my friends persuaded their parents to invest in a first baseman’s mitt. They calculated that if they showed up with the proper glove, they stood a better chance of being picked for the job. The same holds true for many jobs. Since not all roles are equally satisfying, the competition for the best can be intense. Not just children, but adults, jostle with one another to see who will obtain the optimal situations. They want to make sure that they are the ones who get to be on first.

Those who believe that choosing what they want automatically solves their dilemmas are in for a rude awakening. Potential roles are not only selected, they are fought over. As a consequence, those who refuse to compete find themselves shunted aside. If they do not vigorously apply themselves to demonstrating their superiority, it is as if their qualifications do not exist. To have greater strengths and fewer weaknesses
with respect to performing a specific role means nothing if these remain obscure. He who is better at stretching out to catch a thrown ball will not be chosen to play first base if the other players remain ignorant of this ability. Yet they are likely to remain in the dark if he does not call their attention to it. To put off making a splash on the grounds that showing-off is immodest is to choose failure. So too is refusing to compete on the assumption that winning a competition forces someone else to lose. In truth, it will. More than this, the loser will hate losing. Losing hurts. Nevertheless, the alternative is for those who nobly decide to renounce victory to become losers themselves. Some things are zero-sum games. There is only one first baseman per team. Nor is rotating the position sensible. This would introduce such instability that the team would usually lose. No, a division of labor—if it is to increase efficiency—ensures a struggle in which the pleasure of winning and the pain of losing are unequally distributed.

One of the reasons a division of labor is effective is that specialization enables role players to become more proficient at what they do. In playing first base day after day a person gets better at it. But another reason specialization is successful is that it forces people to improve their skills. If their role partners are to allow them to occupy a position, they must demonstrate a superior proficiency. To illustrate, in order to be selected to be a college professor, as opposed to a trash collector, it is necessary to know one’s subject matter. But to know one’s subject matter well enough to be hired by a university, it is essential to apply the effort to learn it. This effort, however, requires caring about doing well academically. One must be motivated to engage in what can be an arduous process. Among the aspiring first basemen on my block in Brooklyn, this meant hours of throwing a rubber ball against a wall to practice catching it. Among
aspiring rock stars, it means spending hours practicing their instruments in the family
garage and then many spending many more years of apprenticeship working in small
clubs for starvation wages. It is through these measures that competitors hone their skills
and demonstrate a commitment to excellence. One of the best accounts of what is
required is Malcolm Gladwell’s *Outliers (The Story of Success)*.

Not incidentally, becoming good enough to compete for one role usually entails
neglecting what must be done to be successful in another. Contrary to one of the more
familiar feminist mantras, it is almost impossible for anyone to have everything. Choices
must be made. Specialties need to receive greater attention than lower priority concerns.
Thus, to become the chief executive of a major corporation it is crucial to spend long
hours on the job. Would-be CEOs cannot be clock-watchers. Nor can they decline to
travel far from home on business. More than once this has disqualified a woman who
decides that her family comes first. Her need to be home when a small children is
running a fever makes it likely that she will not be in the office when a competitor offers
to fulfill a mission she has turned down. In other words, (although there are exceptions)
in choosing to be a good mother, she simultaneously chooses to be a less successful as an
executive. There is, it must be said, nothing wrong with this. The point is not that a
particular choice is better than another, but that choices must be made and that, in
choosing, other things suffer.

The kind of effort that is necessary for occupational success is demonstrated by
the career of one of my colleagues. Michelle Emerson was born of parents who were in
their mid-teens when she was conceived. Her mother was a high school dropout, whereas
her father managed to graduate by going to summer school. Both, thanks to their
precocious responsibilities, were forced to obtain work where they could. For her father
this meant employment with a company that manufactured boxes; for her mother it
entailed working as a loader for UPS. Eventually both did better. Her father ultimately
earned a college degree in accounting, but found it more congenial to sell office
equipment. Her mother obtained a GED and moved up the ladder at UPS. Nevertheless,
her parents understood that their prospects were diminished by their early marriage. As a
result, they pushed Michelle to succeed. She was lectured on the importance of not
becoming prematurely pregnant and of placing greater emphasis on education.

These were lessons Michelle did not forget. From the beginning dependent upon
her own resources to get ahead, she enrolled in Kennesaw State University because it was
at the time a commuter school where the necessity of holding down a job while engaged
in fulltime learning would be accomodated. Mostly deferential in the classroom, she
nonetheless invested in the hours of study needed to obtain an A average. After
graduation, Michelle ventured north to Boston to accompany her then boyfriend. While
there she obtained a job doing research, but she also entered a Master’s program in
criminal justice. Ultimately, the two returned to Georgia, where their relationship soured.
Initially at loose ends, she first tested the teaching waters before enrolling in a Doctoral
program in sociology. At no point did Michelle give up, nor did she lower her sights.
While frequently uncertain, she never settled for the easy way out. Whatever her
insecurities, she refused to slacken her efforts.

Like Miriam and Sutham, Michelle was required to make an emotional break
from family traditions. She would not allow herself to follow the lead of several relatives
who ended up in jail. Instead, while completing her Ph.D., she applied for an adjunct
position teaching at her alma mater. This required her to instruct in both sociology and criminal justice for a financial pittance. Ultimately, when a position opened in CJ, she applied for it. To understand the import of what happened next it must be understood that tenure-track academic slots are highly coveted. Being a professor is a marvelous job, even though the remuneration is modest. As a consequence, positions at good schools such as KSU are highly sought after. It is not unusual for a single opening to attract more than fifty applicants, many with degrees from prestigious universities. Not to put too fine a point on the matter, the competition was fierce. Michelle did have the advantage of being known to those who would decide her fate, but this would have done her little good if she were perceived as incompetent. In this, she was therefore taking a chance. She was allowing her suitability for a role she desired to be judged by a committee of what might one day be her role partners. In other words, she was taking the risk that she might lose something important to her. Simultaneous with this, she was exerting the effort to excel in her graduate program and teaching performances. Whereas others might be intimidated, she did not give up. She did not assume that because the goal was lofty, she would be incapable of it. Ultimately, her exertions were rewarded with success. She was hired and subsequently performed well. Having allowed herself to select the sort of work she enjoyed, and dedicated herself to learning how to perform it, she became a self-motivated expert in an occupation many others find anxiety provoking.

Another of my colleagues, in this case a former colleague, demonstrated greater stick-to-itiveness. As a counselor working for New York State’s Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, Noel Martlock was for many years out-stationed at the same psychiatric hospital as myself. Physically tiny and gnarled by congenital rheumatoid arthritis, Noel
was a marvelous counselor. Our clients loved him because he was both knowledgeable and concerned about their welfare. Most of us, including Noel, assumed that he would occupy this position for life. Unfortunately, he began falling asleep while on the job. Sitting in his chair opposite a client he would, without warning, begin snoring. This was unsettling both for him and the client. When Noel consulted his physician about this, he was diagnosed with narcolepsy. Moreover, the prognosis was not good. In all likelihood, he would continue to nod off at unpredictable moments, perhaps with greater frequency. Since Noel was a conscientious person, he refused to inflict this on his clients. There seemed to be no alternative but to resign. Although he hated the idea of retirement, he could not find a better choice.

About two years later, a near miracle intervened. Noel had been champing at the bit while forced to stay home, hence he continued to seek medical relief. Then he was told the good news. His malady was not narcolepsy. He was actually suffering from a side effect of his rheumatoid arthritis. The reason he was falling asleep was that as the bones in his neck had settled down such as to exert pressure on his windpipe, thereby interfering with his breathing. In essence, he was nodding off from a lack of oxygen. The even better news was that this could be corrected by a minor operation. A simple tracheotomy would bypass the obstruction and allow him to return to normal. This was done and within days he was back to his old alert self. At this, Noel applied for reinstatement to his old job. Since he was well liked by his peers, everyone expected this to be a formality. Instead, the organization’s administrators denied his request. They did not cite a reason, nor was there an appeal process that would allow him to overturn their
decision. For a while, Noel’s future looked bleak. There did not seem to be anything he could do to get back in harness.

But this setback did not take Noel’s competitive spirit into consideration. He was not about to give up. If one avenue were closed, he would open another. And he did. If he could no longer obtain employment as a rehabilitation counselor, he would obtain the training to become a rehabilitation lawyer. It might take effort to pass the law school aptitude test, but he studied hard and overcame this hurdle. It might take even greater exertions for someone suffering from rheumatoid arthritis to go to classes in a city sixty miles away from his home and pass the examinations associated with becoming a J.D., but he took these in stride too. Noel became a lawyer. He even went to work advising disabled clients how to cope with the arcane regulations of government agencies. Noel developed a skill in a field that is difficult even for those who are unimpaired. In deciding what he wanted to do, he was not about to be deterred by a little hard work. Others might fall by the wayside; he would not.

**Turning the Double Play**

Success in the social division of labor does not end with choosing an appropriate direction or competing to gain entry to it. In the end, it is necessary to perform. Competent role players have to make the appropriate adjustments to coordinate their actions with their role partners. They must not only seek to internalize the role scripts created by previous generations; they must participate in modifying these in conjunction with other role players. Together, they need to keep these behavioral patterns relevant to their shared situation. Consider the circumstances of a second baseman. After being selected for this position and practicing his skills, he must still learn how to work in
conjunction with other infielders. He will, for instance, have to ascertain how to turn a
double play in tandem with the shortstop. This, however, will depend on the
idiosyncrasies of the shortstop. How quickly does he arrive at second base? What
position is his body in when he arrives? Does he have a preference for the speed with
which a ball is thrown? Since not all shortstops are the same, our second baseman will
have to fine-tune his actions to function in combination with the individuals with whom
he is teamed. He will have to notice their peculiarities and make suitable adjustments.
Of course, these other persons have to do the same. Each winds up making demands of
the others because their actual performances differ from the theoretical norm.

One of the ways that role players fine-tune their actions is by engaging in
roletaking. Because real world conditions vary, it is usually necessary to consider the
circumstances of one’s partners. What difficulties are they experiencing? Do they have
unique expectations for their own role performances? Are they, perhaps, reacting to
demands emanating from other directions? These peculiarities introduce a need to walk a
mile in their moccasins. Only then is it possible to predict how they will respond.
Indeed, egocentric role players, who perceive only their side of an equation, tend to make
silly mistakes. They act as if they were alone in a community based on cooperative
efforts. No one is so good as to be able to perform at optimal levels without help from
others. Each of us has only two hands, a single brain, and limited muscle power. Worse
still, each of us can only be in one place at a time. Since so many tasks depend on greater
resources than any individual can bring to bear, finding ways to work with others is
essential. Even grade school children understand that second basemen who insist on
turning double plays single handedly are unlikely to turn very many.
This business of roletaking is so fundamental that normal conversations could not take place without it. Sociologists talk about a need for turn-taking. First one person speaks, then when he finishes, the other begins, and so forth. But how is it possible to anticipate when the other person will finish? Mightn’t it be awkward to blurt something out when she is only pausing to take a breath? In fact, we are usually accurate in predicting when the other will stop. Besides cues from body language and verbal cadence, long experience in participating in conversations makes it possible to sense where others are going. We understand how stories are put together and when interjections tend to be complete. We are also good at anticipating what another person needs to get off her chest because we know how we might feel were we in her situation. It is only then that we jump in, and, when the circumstances are reversed, that she does the same.

A similar competence is necessary for occupational performances. This is certainly the case with being a college professor. Several years ago a geography colleague related a lesson he learned while in graduate school. It seems that one of his professors advised him that the best way to lecture was to focus one’s attention on the back wall. It was hypothetically crucial not to make eye contact lest one’s concentration be disengaged. In fact, this is about the worst advice a would-be teacher can receive. Competence at teaching depends on communicating information to a broad range of students. It is not about being a prima donna who delivers a prearranged performance without disruption. Effective teachers are sensitive to how their words are received. They look into the eyes of their students to determine if they are following along. This typically reveals when their listeners are confused or bored. Looking directly at students
to fathom what they are thinking also provides clues about how to package one’s message. Thus, a joke that works today can be squirreled away for another day.

Another mechanism for coordinating role performances is role negotiations. Role partners continuously make demands of one another; demands that are regularly modified in the process of being reciprocal. Negotiations are all about interactive claims that eventually revise what both parties do. In short, they make deals, and then honor them. Deal making, however, is a give-and-take process wherein neither party gets everything sought. Negotiators make compromises. They understand that in most cases neither side has the power to impose a unilateral solution. Even the most powerful individuals must make concessions if they are to elicit cooperation. The fact is that we human beings do not like to be pushed around. Nor do we enjoy losing. If we are engaged in coordinated activities, we usually want something in return. When we do not get it, we nurse grievances that, at some point, are expressed in obstructive behaviors. The best way to forestall this is to make a bargain both parties find acceptable. In this way, both sides understand that, in acceding to the other, there is a payoff in obtaining something else desirable.

Nevertheless, role negotiations are tricky. Not everyone is equally competent at them. Some people, especially if they are insecure, can be so demanding that they incite opposition. So fearful are they of losing that they make over-the-top stipulations that can be satisfied only by complete capitulation. Rather than listen to the needs of their partners, they attempt to foreclose the discussion by imposing non-negotiable demands. Often they believe that only by being stubborn do they demonstrate the strength needed to obtain respect. In reality, the opposite is usually true. Good role negotiators are not
strident. They do not threaten to wreak mayhem if they do not win. Good role negotiators are problem solvers. Confident in their own abilities, they do not feel a need to triumph at every point. This frees them to be good role takers who can conceive of solutions from which both parties gain. While they want the division of labor in which they are situated be favorable to themselves, they also understand that it cannot be favorable only to themselves. Satisfying role performances—that is, role performances that are satisfactory to the self and others—depend on maintaining working alliances. Because the roles people perform are contingent on being the respect of well-disposed role partners, serviceable partnerships rely on dependable cooperation. Alienating one’s partners is counterproductive. It sacrifices the entire loaf rather than settle for a nourishing half-loaf.

Finally, competent role performances depend on personal responsibility. Adjustments are unlikely to come from persons who do not exhibit a pride of ownership. Second basemen who do not feel like second basemen, that is, who do not identify with their job, are apt not to make improvements. They just go through the motions without experiencing distress when things go wrong. They feel no guilt when they make mistakes; nor exert effort to prevent foolish errors. People who identify with their roles can be trusted to make independent decisions. They understand, and accept, the fact that what they do makes a difference. They fix what gets broken. As a result, they also carry out the actions they have pledged to undertake. Responsible role performers execute the roles upon which others rely. As professors, they show up for class. As baseball players, they are allowed to go to bat when the bases are loaded. As the chief financial officers of major corporations, they are counted on to balance the books.
The Family Dance

So far the sorts of roles we have concentrated on are the vocational ones. Clearly professionalized selves are apt to get a larger piece of the career action than those who are not. Both expert and self-motivated, they can be trusted with assignments that do not require close supervision. Yet there is another, equally important, aspect of the social division of labor at which middle class decision-makers must be proficient. People who want to be happy and respected have to be competent at their personal roles, especially their family roles. They have to be as skilled at home as at work. In some ways families are like dance troupes. These too exhibit choreographed behavioral patterns. As a result, how the players interrelate depends on the assignments they receive. Some may delegated the role of first ballerina; others the male lead, and still others that of spear-carrier. In essence, the duties upon which the family counts are divided into specialties upon which the whole must rely. Far from been undifferentiated, the players have to be careful not to replicate each other’s parts. Indeed, the fact that they are biologically related and intimately associated reinforces the need to maintain role boundaries. To be a husband is different from being a wife, which is different from being the oldest son, which is different from being the youngest daughter. In most families each participant knows his or her place and generally respects it.

Yet even within families not all roles are equally desirable. Someone has to clean the toilet bowls; someone has to take out the garbage. There is, therefore, a built-in competition for the best parts. Although family members are supposed to love one another, intra-familial conflicts are among the most passionate. Siblings who do not squabble over who will do the dishes are an oddity. So too are brothers and sisters who
do not need to be separated by parental referees when their role negotiations break down. But even the adults, that is, the husbands and wives, have their disputes. They too can feel that their toes have been stepped on when a role partner poaches on protected territory. If one person specializes in cooking, but the other rearranges the kitchen appliances without authorization, there may be hell to pay. In a sense, because the partners belong to a division of labor, one is acknowledged as in control of certain areas and the other is not. The first may thus take the lead with respect to gardening, while the second does so with respect to paying the bills. They can therefore cooperate without worrying that a victory for one translates into a defeat for the other. If one is a star, this need not imply that the other isn’t. Both may be luminaries in their own areas of expertise, hence each can root for the other on the assumption that when their partner wins, so do they.

Clearly, family members must be competent at creating a division of labor with respect to the mundane tasks of family living. They have to arrange for the reliable performance of activities upon which their joint functioning depends. Moreover, they must achieve this in a manner where the grievances are held to a minimum. Were this not to occur, propinquity would facilitate intolerable frictions. Close enough to be in each other’s hair whenever anything went wrong; they would also be close enough to inflict serious damage. The family may be thought of as a haven in a heartless world, but it can also be a rough harbor if the ships are constantly crashing into one another. In this case, it would be the locus of interminable arguments and petty reprisals. Nevertheless, families possess the potential to inflict even greater injuries. This is so because not only do they divide up instrumental tasks; they also allocate emotional ones. In addition to
deciding who performs which functional activities, they decide how the expressive landscape will be arranged. Put another way, they, in concert, assign each other their personal identities. In the mere act of working together, each is treated as a particular type of person.

Power may be thought of as something that inheres in social institutions. Being top dog might seem to be confined to corporate politics, not to a family’s hearth and home. And on a certain level this is true. Yet on another, it is decidedly untrue. Parents of more than one child know that at some point their offspring will vie to be the favorite child. Sibling rivalries erupt not only over doing the dishes; they also arise as to how brothers and sisters will be perceived. Each one will want to occupy a position of favor. If, for instance, Dad loves athletics, one of the children, probably the one with the greatest raw talent, may seek to be the family athlete. But since there can be only one best athlete, the others generally have to settle for different specialties. Or, if, per chance, Mom is a bookworm, one of the brood may opt to become a scholar. He or she will seek opportunities to demonstrate greater intelligence. But this means that the others will probably be perceived as less smart—and may even be assigned the role of the “dumb one.” In any event, these behavioral specialties are apt to be translated into personal perceptions. How each child understands his/her own abilities is converted into roles scripts that can persist for a lifetime. The smart one may be deemed eternally smart, whereas the dumb one is considered eternally dumb. Such roles are generally thought of as personality traits and, therefore, as indelible.

Plainly, some personal roles have positive payoffs. Being the family athlete or the family scholar can bring emotional rewards. They can contribute to earning both love
and respect. But other personal roles may have negative consequences. Being the dumb
one or the klutz, or worse still, the family scapegoat can have devastating implications.
The family scapegoat, that is, the one who gets blamed whenever anything goes wrong,
may thereby be condemned for imaginary failures. A scapegoat’s central obligation is to
protect other members of the family by validating their defense mechanisms. As a
consequence, these others can convince themselves that they have done nothing wrong
because it is obviously the scapegoat’s fault. This division of labor works for them—but
not the scapegoat. Furthermore, as the butt of others’ taunts, he or she usually develops a
whipping boy mentality. Convinced that he is at fault, he feels guilty for others’ sins. In
this, his role partners, including those from outside the family, conclude that he probably
is at fault. They then join in the blame game and reinforce the scapegoat role. This
specialty is thus perpetuated long after it arose and may keep a person in misery for a
lifetime.

To be a competent professionalized self, it is critical not to be trapped in a
dysfunctional personal role. It is crucial not to recycle role scripts that discourage self-
directed decision-making. If, to cite another example, a person has grown up in an
alcoholic family, it is essential not to be recruited into the alcoholic dance. Alcoholics
have a way for creating a family constellation that revolves around the alcoholic’s need to
drink. A spouse, of instance, may be conscripted into the role of co-dependent. Co-
dependents are not themselves addicted to alcohol. Rather, they are addicted to
facilitating the alcoholism of their partners. They make excuses for the drinker and earn
an income when the alcoholic cannot. Often they keep the drinker in alcohol so as to
keep him or her reliant on the co-dependent. In this, they ensure their own importance.
Another typical role in such families is that of the family hero. Frequently the eldest child will be delegated the task of protecting his parents from themselves. He will clean up their messes and intercede when external events threaten the family’s integrity. On the surface the family hero may eventually be vocationally successful, often to the same degree that his parents were not; nevertheless the costs are high. Family heroes protect everyone in the family save themselves. Their own emotional needs are neglected so that they never fully attain happiness. Also costly is the role of family mascot. This position is generally reserved for the youngest child. He or she will be treated almost as a family pet. Instead of her needs being noticed, she is thought of as cute and cuddly. In this, she is used as the equivalent of a human security blanket. Others rub up against her when they feel a need for warmth and reassurance. She, of course, is denied similar privileges.

Because the strength required to be a self-directed leader is sapped by dysfunctional roles, these need to be avoided like the plague. Individuals who wish to be successful must be able to participate in family negotiations that create an evenhanded division of labor. To the extent possible, each must be assigned duties that facilitate meeting their personal needs. Unlike extra-familial arrangements, where winners and losers are inevitable, a rough parity must be sought among intimates. Inequalities, especially gross inequalities, make cooperation, and more particularly emotional support, nearly impossible. Nevertheless many families are beset by toxic role politics. Dyads become triads, which are quickly replaced by shifting alliances. Often two members plot against a third who is actively seeking to get one of the plotters to betray the other. In the end, everyone suffers from the uncertainties of unending conflicts. What then is an ambitious person to do? In fact, as long as one is a child, there may not be much that can
Parents who are incapable of fair role negotiations have the power to deny evenhandedness to their children. The young may be aware of this injustice, but, under threat of punishment, are precluded from protesting against it. Whatever their misgivings, they may have to await adulthood before they can redress this wrong. Only then may they be able to renounce unfair personal roles and seek more balanced interpersonal relationships.

Adults, of course, have more latitude. If they have never been tutored in how to negotiate fairly, it is time to learn. They must discover how to engage in problem-solving dialogues intended to generate egalitarian divisions of labor. In this, they must be skilled role-takers who perceive the needs of others almost as well as their own. If they do not, if they cannot, their marriages are apt to be skewed and their children oppressed. Still, fairness is not automatic. It is something that must be developed. A person must seek out the strengths and insights to be a competent negotiator. He or she must overcome the temptations to exploit momentary advantages. Long-term interests, not merely short-term opportunities, should guide a person’s negotiation strategies. Yet this too needs to be learned. It too is an expertise that must be internalized if it is to be available when needed.
Chapter 6

Winners and Losers

Fighting City Hall

It was my first house. While living in New York City I had always been an apartment dweller. But in Rochester the prices were lower. Much to my surprise I found that I could afford a modest stand-alone dwelling. And I loved it. To quote my fourth grade teacher Miss Ball, it was my “pride and joy.” Located on a leafy, tree-lined street, it backed up against an insurance agency located on a major avenue. Separating my backyard from the agency’s rear parking area was a sturdy fence. Since very few vehicles ever parked back there, I retained my privacy, and as the lawyers might say, the quiet enjoyment of my property. Then, after several peaceful years, came a rude surprise. The afternoon mail brought news that my commercial neighbor, having outgrown its quarters, was to be replaced by a gymnasium. Yet this prospective tenant required a zoning variance before moving in. The letter now in my hand was notice of the compulsory hearing before the local zoning board. For me the question was should I attend. Growing up in a huge metropolis, I had been schooled in the truism that you can’t fight city hall. Why then would I want to face the disappointment of being run over rough shod by suburban officials?

Eventually I decided to go to the meeting. The idea of the constant comings and goings of troupes of suburban matrons intent on losing unwanted cellulite was too unsettling to accept without objection. Weeks later, when I entered the council chamber, it was instantly apparent that I was not alone. Most of the other attendees were, however,
there over other matters. For about an hour or so, dozens of them approached the open
microphone to register their views about a variety of concerns. Soon it was my turn. But
before I spoke came the jarring news that the proposed gym was not to be dedicated to
aerobics. It was to be a strength gym. Young men, mostly high school students, would
come there to pump iron. The very thought of this sent my system into overdrive.
Instead of attractive middle-aged women sharing gossip across from my backyard as they
loitered by their SUVs, I would be treated to testosterone flushed musclemen butting
heads to prove their masculinity. Somewhat discombobulated, I nevertheless managed to
maintain my composure. Although I was certain of a hostile reception, I went forward to
express my complaint. This new facility would destroy the tranquility of my home. How
could the town allow this? How could it sanction undermining my serenity?

As I spoke, I scanned the faces of the commissioners to determine how my plea
was being received. Was I persuasive? Would they dismiss my needs out of hand?
Fortunately, the answer came quickly. From the very first words of the first
commissioner to respond to my argument, it was plain that I was addressing a
sympathetic panel. The zoning commissioners were also troubled by the gymnasium
scheme. They too could envisage it changing the character of the town’s primary artery.
As a result, their questions were gentle and their observations congruent with my own.
Within minutes, it was evident that they were going to reject the request for a variance.
My serenity would be preserved. Amazingly, I had fought city hall and it turned out to
be a walkover. In electing to be assertive, it became manifest that assertiveness
sometimes paid off. I was not simply a nameless citizen whose needs would be
reflexively ignored. To the contrary, my views combined with those of local officials to form a winning coalition.

Human hierarchies have a terrible reputation. They are alleged to be oppressive. The obloquy hurled at tyrannical city halls is modest in comparison with the invective leveled at what are often described as dictatorial sources of power. It is regularly claimed that whenever some people have more clout than others, there is a danger of despotism. Elites, by their very nature, are suspected of exploitation. Those at their top supposedly become intoxicated with their elevated stations and utilize them to extract more than their fair share from inferiors who do not possess the means to resist. Like the absolute monarchs of old, they assume that they have a divine mandate to ignore the protests of their subordinates. Somehow endowed with bluer blood than others, they presume to stand at the apex of a supernaturally decreed “Great Chain of Being.” If they rise above others, it is because they were transcendentally meant to rise above. While they may be better off than lesser mortals, this is part of an eternal plan. Not only must their status be accepted, it should not be resisted. Lesser beings with the temerity to object are, as it were, asking toads to be turned into princes. In their ignorance, they seek to upset the natural order of things.

Karl Marx would have vigorously disagreed with this version of the facts. More than once he trumpeted against the injustice of powerful minorities that dared to take advantage of the weak. Social leaders might imagine that they were beyond retribution, but time would prove them wrong. One day the oppressed would realize they were being exploited and join forces to tear off the shackles holding them down. In combination, their power would be greater than that of their tormenters and they would reverse the
temporary verdict of history. Inequality was not a divine mandate. It was the transitory result of class warfare that could be reversed by counter-warfare. Once ordinary people realized their strength, they would impose a more egalitarian system. Hierarchy would be banished and the natural human desire for comradeship emerge. The artificial props that kept city hall dominant would be swapped for a collegial social order in which everyone was free to live as he or she desired. A veritable proletarian utopia would become the norm. With property ownership outlawed, and government withered away, no one would be in a position to order anyone else around—or want to.

Marx did not exactly say how this would unfold except to assert that there would be a revolution followed first by socialism and then by communism. Eventually people would learn to give to others according to their ability and take only according to need. This, however, was romantic theorizing. It had more to do with daydreams of universal love than with actual human conditions. A political revolution did occur, but it scarcely banished hierarchy. Real life demonstrated that socialism could be more tyrannical than capitalism, while “communism” was revealed to be pure fantasy. The Soviet Union under Stalin became a huge gulag. Rather than unselfish cooperation, it imposed a state sponsored terror. Even under Gorbachev, the USSR was a bankrupt dinosaur. True believers may to this day refuse to give up the ghost, but the track record of collectivist systems is not reassuring. Experiments in this direction have yet to prove that hierarchical arrangements can be eliminated, at least, not in large-scale societies. For better or worse, ranking systems, that is, systems in which inequalities persist seem to be built into human nature. People may hate to be treated as inferior, but they apparently enjoy feeling superior too much to eschew the opportunity.
This is the bad news. The good news is that hierarchy does not have to be tyrannical. Not only is it possible to fight city hall; it is possible to win. Human beings may seek greater power than their neighbors, but this power does not have to be absolute. Nor does it have to be permanent. Hierarchies are a matter of relative power and, therefore, what goes up can come down, and vice versa. Likewise, that which is up is not immune to challenge. In relatively democratic societies, elites are not treated as living Gods. They are not accorded total sway over their inferiors. Should an elected official, or a wealthy person, demand complete deference, others, including the privileged, are scandalized. The kow-tow was expected in the palaces of Chinese Emperors, but it is not acceptable in suburban town halls or corporate boardrooms. In a society based on a highly specialized, commercial division of labor, positions of power are circumscribed. Those who exercise superior authority may give orders, and demand greater rewards, but they cannot be completely arbitrary. What they demand is constrained by social rules. Although they have power, it is power over only certain things. And while they can impose sanctions, these cannot be brutal. Nor can they be too greedy. Should they ignore these restrictions, they will find the tables turned. If they attempt to be too oppressive, they will soon find themselves oppressed. The folks at Enron discovered this a bit late, but when retribution arrived, it was severe.

As importantly, in a mass commercialized society, today’s losers can be tomorrow’s winners. A division of labor grounded in professionalization provides opportunities for further professionalization. Those who at present do not possess a self-motivated expertise may eventually acquire a greater proficiency than those who now flaunt their superiority. One of the glories of a society that depends on a self-directed
decentralization of effort is that people can individually decide to improve their status. They can acquire the skills, alliances, and internally motivated decision-making abilities to move beyond their betters. Social mobility is not, of course, automatic. It does not happen to everyone. But it is real. The trick is to understand how it is achieved. People need to do what is required to realize it. In order to become a winner, it is necessary to assert personal strengths. An individual has to go out and risk confronting others. Those who stay home and never attend zoning board meetings, never discover their potential. If all they do thumb through dog-eared copies of Karl Marx, they will await a millennium that never comes. Instead of winning, they must content themselves with fantasies of egalitarianism.

Fighting city hall, that is, fighting for success, entails bona fide conflicts. Social victories do not flow from passivity or a self-satisfied fatalism. With respect to personal relationships, it is often said that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. The same applies to power. Those who never try, never come out ahead. Individuals, who do not take risks, do not experience the elation of achieving their dreams. Still, this can be an empty cliché. After all, don’t television hucksters counsel their listeners on how to become winners in three easy steps? Don’t they proffer the equivalent of patent medicines guaranteed to be cure-alls for personal failure? Obviously more important than assurances of social mobility is a legitimate explanation of how it is achieved. How do people move up the social ladder? What do they have to do take control of their fates? In short, how do they become professionalized winners in a hierarchical society?
The Middle Class Revolution

Almost as banal as peons to winning are claims of middle class status. Ask almost any American to which class they belong and the answer is the middle class. Well over ninety percent declare this is where they fit. The reason is simple. The middle class is the nation’s dominant social stratum. Indeed, America is the first truly middle class nation in the history of the world. It is the first large-scale society in which the middling orders are in control. Not only do they have the weight of numbers, but they set the standards to which others are expected to conform. While it must not be supposed that individual members of the middle class are always more powerful than individual members of the upper class, collectively they are the social winners. Collectively, they make many more important decisions than their ostensible betters. As a group, they set the priorities according to which even their superiors are judged. This means that individual members of the middle class have considerable control. They may not be completely autonomous and cannot always protect themselves from interference from above, but, on a daily basis, they make decisions that have substantial impact; decisions that allow them enormous personal latitude.

Consider the circumstances of an art director at an advertising agency. He is not a completely free agent. He has a boss. He also has an assortment of clients. These others make demands of him; demands that he cannot always evade. Sometimes he is deeply frustrated at being over-ruled by someone whose tastes are inferior to his own. He may even go home muttering about the injustice of it all. Nevertheless, he also has tremendous room for maneuver. When a project comes up, he is liable be assigned to work out potential solutions. Told, in general terms, what is expected, he may retreat into
a creative cocoon there to produce a series of storyboards that are later presented to the project team. These others then talk over his proposals so as to decide which is best. In this, the art director may disagree with their decision. Indeed, he may be so irritated that he feels like a medieval serf. But he is no serf. He has exercised power; probably more power than any other member of the team. As a professional, his self-motivated expertise is relied upon to generate the options from which the others choose. Whether he appreciates it or not, he helps set the agenda. In other words, he controls their output even more than they control his. Collaborative decisions are not unitary. A social division of labor does not focus all of the power in one place. Complex divisions of labor are synergistic. Their achievements are often greater than what any individual contributor might manage. This means that the art director’s ability to make decisions is not obviated by being part of a group; if anything, it is magnified by his participation within it. In other words, he is not powerless. To the contrary, he is more powerful for being part of a potent team. Nor is he a cipher. He may not always get everything he wants, but he may well get more than the others with whom he is collaborating—including the team leader or the client.

Middle class decision-makers are social leaders. Their decisions are not self-indulgent flights of fancy. When they opt for one alternative rather than another, what they propose may become a blueprint for how others operate. To put the matter simply, they possess authority. Others are prepared to follow their directions without extensive protest. Authority, as Max Weber long ago explained, is legitimate power. It is power that others accept. When a police officer orders drivers to stop at a busy intersection, the motorists do not demand that he demonstrate his right to give this order. When her boss
asks that a project be completed by a certain date, an employee does not tell him to whistle Dixie. The same, by and large, holds true of most members of the middle class. All other things being equal, there is a wide-ranging disposition to respect their dictates. As presumed social experts, they are believed to know what they are talking about. As reputed professionals, they are trusted to exercise appropriate leadership. The result is an aura of authority few are prepared to challenge.

Up to this point it has been assumed that it makes sense to depict some people as “middle class.” Implied in this attribution is the notion that the meaning of social class is self-evident. Clearly, there could be no middle class if there were no such thing as social class. But what is social class? Why are some people upper, some middle, and some lower? This is a good question, for if hierarchy is normal and universal, social class is not. Because not every society is stratified along these lines, this structure needs to be explained. Hunter-gatherer societies are relatively egalitarian. They have leaders and followers, but no social classes. Agrarian empires, in contrast, are far from egalitarian. They have emperors, aristocrats, warriors, merchants, and peasants, with the lines between these presumed to be hard and fast. Often designated Estate systems, these agrarian societies assume that their members are born into a definite status, which their individual efforts cannot alter. The extreme version of this arrangement is the caste system. Frequently enforced by religious convictions, these societies institutionalize the idea of divine right. They insist that social mobility is impossible because the inherent qualities of human beings render mobility impossible. An untouchable is an untouchable because he did not accumulate enough Karma in a former life. He was, in a sense, born a human donkey, hence nothing he can do can change that.
Social class systems, in contrast, are predicated on social mobility. Being upper, middle, or lower is, theoretically, not a matter of spiritual inevitability, but of personal achievement. Movin’ on up is possible because there is such a thing as moving up. Sad to say, there is also such a thing as “movin’ on down,” but this tends to be discounted in an environment where membership in the middle classes has been expanding. In a techno-commercial society, social mobility is especially prized because expert, decentralized leadership is crucial to accomplishing an ever-larger proportion of complex tasks. The idea is to allow the best-qualified individuals to occupy the positions for which they are best suited. Self-motivated role performances are encouraged because these are associated with quality contributions. This suggests that if merit is recognized, and respected, everyone will benefit. Similarly, authority is supposed to be grounded in competence. People are predisposed to follow the directives of social leaders because middle class leadership is thought result in superior decisions. Those who are at the top, especially if they belong to the upper middle class, are presumed to be highly professionalized. It is assumed that they possess a self-motivated expertise. Moreover, in a mass society, where most people are strangers to one another, this presumption can be critical to interpersonal cooperation.

Yet in a world of strangers, that is, in a Gesellschaft society, it is nearly impossible to be certain that others are as competent as they advertise. The very fact that they are strangers makes it difficult to ascertain their relative abilities. Another characteristic of social class stratification, over and above merit-based social mobility, is that relative status may be asserted symbolically. Who is more powerful than whom is often determined by how a person speaks, the sort of vehicle she drives, or the label in a
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suit jacket. In class systems, appearances matter. The reputation of one’s alma mater, the sort of sports one plays, and the neighborhood in which one lives serve as calling cards that alert others of one’s relative clout. Later events may clarify who is better at making decisions, but without specifics to go on, what seems to be the case is often treated as if it were the case. A Rockefeller, because he is a Rockefeller, is accorded greater deference than a Smith, even though Smith is smarter and more accomplished than a minor league Rockefeller. Genuine competence, what Thomas Jefferson referred to as an aristocracy of merit, continues to matter, but it cannot be everything in a world dominated by anonymity. Merit cannot always come out on top where it cannot always be determined.

Those who wish to move up must understand this. They must appreciate the importance of self-direction, but also its limitations. The real world is not perfect, but it is more likely to yield its treasures to those who understand where they lie. Such persons recognize that becoming professionalized is an asset, not a guarantee of success. They want to participate in the middle class revolution, but they realize that, like most revolutions, it is subject to cultural lag. Members of my generation, having grown up with party line phones and rotary dials, may have difficulty adjusting to the technical innovations of contemporary cell phones. I personally consider these a tool of the devil. Not only is this because their cacophonous rings interrupt my classroom theatrics or because I am disconcerted by legions of young people wandering across our campus apparently speaking to themselves; I am even more distressed by the prospect of being within voice contact of anyone who wishes to speak to me whenever he or she desires it. As I factitiously put it to my students, I think of myself as too important to endure these
interruptions. I am, to be candid, much more comfortable with the technologies of my youth. Nevertheless, cultural lag refers to more than this sort of technological lag. It also refers to the ways of life with which we grew up. The attitudes, beliefs, values, and norms of our childhoods survive long past their point of origin. As we have seen, they may persist to influence our role behavior, and also our social statuses. People who do not think of themselves as middle class may not act middle class, even though they no longer live in a two and a half room apartment over a grocery store or in a tumble down house along a dirt country road.

People who grow up in a working class environment typically incorporate working class attitudes. Having been indoctrinated in conforming to parental demands, they operate as conformists even as they attempt to become professionalized. Instead of becoming self-directed, they cling to a social dependence they despise. Not surprisingly, in eschewing the independent competence necessary to become middle class decision-makers, they have difficulty moving up the social class ladder. Because they are uncomfortable exercising autonomous responsibility, they refuse to acquire the expertise needed to become socially powerful. Paradoxically, even as they protest the unfairness of deferring to the pretensions of their betters, they decline to invest in efforts to become more knowledgeable or emotionally mature. While they may choose to purchase a big SUV, they decide not to read a technical book. Likewise, whereas they adore attending whiz-bang action movies, they beg off engaging in personal archeology. Indoctrinated to feel intimidated by city hall, they vociferously complain about being exploited, yet they refuse to attend zoning board meetings.
At KSU this disposition shows up at examination time. Since many of my students are of working class origin, they have been taught to be obedient. Mind you, they hate being obedient and bristle at the indignity of following directions, yet before each test they invariably ask the same questions. What will be on the exam? Can you give us a study guide? Just tell us the answer to the first question. When I respond that I am trying to teach self-direction, they are unimpressed. When I further explain that I am providing practice in dealing with uncertainties, few thank me for the lesson. Even when I elaborate upon the necessity of making independent decisions in the responsible jobs they hope some day to occupy, they remain resistant. Nevertheless, if they are to move up, if they are to become members of the upper middle class, they will have to master the art of self-direction. When they must one day decide upon organizational policy, they will need to know how to proceed. Good salaries and hefty expense accounts are no substitute for the sound judgment and social skills expected of leadership positions. If they cannot exercise these, in the long run they cannot become the social winners they expect to be.

**Leaders are Winners**

With social hierarchies and interpersonal competition roundly denounced by social reformers, it can be difficult to appreciate what goes into becoming a professionalized winner. With even dodge ball deplored as a threat to self-esteem, the connection between leading and winning tends to get lost. Everyone is supposed to grow up to be a winner. This way, everyone can become a leader. Were this so, the modern world would be inhabited by a tribe of all chiefs and no Indians. Schoolchildren understand the fatuousness of this, while many academic authorities do not. They
genuinely believe that total equality is possible. It does not occur to them that social coordination would be impossible were everyone to possess equal power. Also lost on them is the truism that leaders gain their authority by being relative winners. As a result, members of the establishment reject the jostling for position that goes with inequality. Their preferred ideal is much gentler. They want everyone to be nice to everyone else. While they do not object to people being winners, they are ferociously opposed to anyone being forced to lose. Somehow they don’t notice that for certain people to become winners, others must become losers. Winning, to be sure, does not require that the victors win all of the time or that the losers lose every time, but it does imply that some people will lose some of the time.

Needless to say, those who do not believe in winning or losing have difficulty understanding how victories occur. More than this, they have difficulty in comprehending how social hierarchies are created and maintained. In their world, the inequalities that go with social stratification are interpreted as illegitimate mishaps. That some people rank above others is attributed to unnatural manipulations which must be banished from civilization. For starters, children need to be raised so that they are, at all times, respectful of the rights of others. Once they realize that forcing rivals to lose is immoral, they will cheerfully cooperate in groups committed to the welfare of all. Provided with everything they need through these egalitarian collaborations, they will envy nothing. Themselves enduringly respected by their peers, they will come to recognize that naught is gained by attempting to dominate others. As a consequence, after complete social parity arrives, people will return to the hunter-gatherer mentality
that is their rightful legacy. They will have surmounted the degenerating effects of capitalism and approached closer to legitimate happiness.

The reader will, I hope, forgive me if my tone sounds dismissive. I also hope it is understood that the above scenario is pure nonsense. We human beings are hierarchical animals. We create ranking systems as a function of our social natures. Status systems, per se, are not the selfish invention of egocentric elites. They derive from activities in which we all participate. However high or low our stations, we engage in behaviors that result in inequality. The central mechanism that produces social hierarchy is what may be called the “test of strength.” People, without external prompting, spontaneously compare themselves with others to determine who is more powerful. Like rams that butt heads together to determine which is stronger, people bang up against one another to establish which one will back down. After squaring off to determine who is superior at a particular endeavor, they reach a tentative decision. One emerges to be considered the victor, whereas the other is deemed the loser. As significantly, after this verdict is rendered, their conflict temporarily ceases. For a while, at least, one is perceived as dominant and the other subordinate. In other words, stabilized opinions as to who is the winner and who the loser arise from these contests. Both competitors subsequently evaluate the victor as stronger, whereas they reckon the loser as weaker. Even outside observers conclude that one is more potent than the other. They too assume that the result of the clash is indicative of a fundamental truth.

Moreover, conclusions about relative strength are quickly converted into social conduct. Cognitive judgments about who is stronger almost immediately become assumptions about relative authority. The winner not only believes he is stronger, he is
apt to lord it over the loser. Winners assume that their decisions regarding joint endeavors deserve to be respected because they are more powerful than others. Meanwhile, losers feel intimidated by winners. They not only shy away from challenging a victor; they accord a winner’s judgment greater weight than their own. In addition, reputations for strength and weakness travel beyond the confines of the immediate contestants. Others privy to the results are also more likely to conclude that the winner ought to be obeyed, whereas that the loser can be safely ignored. As a consequence, winners derive greater social power, while the interpersonal clout of losers is diminished. Winners are treated as leaders, in part, because it is assumed that they can enforce their dictates. On the other hand, were their relative power not respected, however brilliant their insights, few would notice their validity. As significantly, few would follow them. Others would instead rely on their own judgments, concluding that their own strength validated their decisions.

Winning, and developing a reputation for winning, may sound like crude mechanisms for determining interpersonal ranking. They are certainly not a rational means of arriving at shared judgments, in the sense of according the best-supported opinions the greatest weight. Nevertheless, they are among the fundamental procedures underlying social organization. Intelligent observers may dismiss this pushing and pulling as a troglodyte holdover from Neanderthal times, yet even they participate in these conflicts. If the truth be known, they too wish to be considered important and hence seek to achieve power through tests of strength. Who, after all, wants to be a loser? Who is comfortable with being passed over as a wimp? Virtually everyone attempts to demonstrate superior personal qualities and feels vindicated when these are
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recognized. Although vulgar contests over precedence seem coarse, even potential reformers seek to win arguments by intimidating their critics? They too understand that social power and respect go hand in hand; that without the one, they would not obtain the other.

One of the things that make human tests of strength unique is that they cover a variety of assets. If, during the rut, rams confine themselves to banging heads with other rams, people are less stereotyped. People create hierarchies based on a broad range of personal strengths. Two men might wrestle to see who is physically stronger, but they could also engage in a verbal contest to determine which is more articulate. Almost any personal quality can be disputed to determine which individual ranks higher on this characteristic. The issues can be as diverse as foot speed, an ability to make money, or personal beauty. Indeed, people are always inventing new attributes over which to compete; abilities as insipid as who can spit the farthest. Because everyone wants to be best, we human beings are habitually on the lookout for something over which to be superior. This is what the Guinness book of world records is all about. Nevertheless, in a middle class society the hierarchies that matter most are those that concern economic or political merit. Relative expertise in these areas is a means of distributing social roles and also of determining relative ranking within particular groupings. Which executive, of a gaggle of competitors, will move up the corporate ladder? Most probably the one who is best at generating profits or organizing complex activities. Which lawyer will achieve the greatest occupational prestige? Most likely the one with the best court record.

Because modern societies consist of a multitude of interpenetrating hierarchies, there are a multitude of spheres in which relative expertise can be established. Those who would
be successful therefore seek out venues in which they possess the greatest advantages and the fewest deficits. These are the ones where they are more likely to win.

But merit is not enough. In the abstract, it is no more than a curiosity. Middle class winners must be prepared to fight for comparative priority. Superior abilities do not speak for themselves. If they are not courageously asserted in tests of strength against others who are as eager to prove their mettle, they count for little. Sometimes very smart people do not achieve as much as it was once assumed they would. When they were young, their friends and relatives assessed their intelligence and concluded that they could not help but become winners. Then the school of hard knocks intervened. Individuals, who seemed sure things, when confronted by energetic rivals, backed off and fled the field. At the crucial moment, their courage failed them and they allowed others to surge ahead. However great their raw abilities, because these were not effectively asserted, they could not demonstrate their comparative merit. In contrast, others who did not seem as likely to move to the top proved more tenacious. They might not have been the smartest, or the richest, but they refused to lose, and hence did not. They became the Pete Rose’s of life. Less well endowed by others, they hustled so hard that they set records for getting on base. They were the one’s who took a chance on establishing a Fed-Ex. Although not always the one’s with the best ideas, they had the best follow through. They were even prepared to lose a few on their way to winning the big one’s. They became the Sam Walton’s of the world; the one’s not stymied by a couple of bankruptcies. They may have been knocked down a time or two, but they got up to found a Wal-Mart.
Often discounted in the scuffle for social success is the need for people-courage. Tests of strength are exercises in will-power. They are toe-to-toe, nose-to-nose face-offs between human beings that are generally settled by who intimidates whom. In the movie *a League of Their Own*, Tom Hanks, as the manager of a female baseball team, informs one of his players when she breaks out in tears that “there is no crying in baseball.” In the game that he is accustomed to playing, visible tears are indicators of weakness. They suggest to an opponent that you are vulnerable and thus will invite renewed efforts to beat you. One, therefore, has to be tough enough to conceal one’s pain and fears, and to press forward to victory. This is what people-courage is all about. It involves persistence despite feelings of personal inadequacy. Nowadays some businesses attempt to turn their managers into winners by sponsoring expeditions into the wilderness. Executives are supposed to learn courage by crossing rope bridges over raging rapids or by rappelling down hundred foot cliffs. In fact, these activities promote physical courage, not people-courage. They help the participants deal with fears of physical injury, but not the emotional injuries inflicted by interpersonal intimidation. To win tests of strength, it is the latter that is needed. It is this sort of courage that allows a person to hang in there over the long haul.

Middle class leaders, if they are to be hierarchical winners, need to know what they are good at and to develop the emotional maturity to take advantage of their assets. They have to be skilled at personal archeology so as to determine where their individual strengths (and weaknesses) lie and expert at the internal control of the intense emotions elicited by direct challenges. Whatever their personal limitations, they must seek to surmount these. To trust merely to luck is to allow others to move ahead in a race that
never ends. It is to assume that others are not working to overcome their drawbacks—
when some surely are. Getting stronger may take many years and involve numerous
setbacks, but it is worth the effort. The psychic payoff is well worth the wear and tear,
and the doubts.

Establishing hierarchical primacy is an issue for most middle class leaders.
Besides getting stronger, they must find ways to acquire a reputation for self-directed
competence before they can proceed to function as decision-makers. Relative superiority
is often operationalized in the phenomenon of the new broom. When leaders are freshly
arrived, they know they are likely to be tested by their subordinates. They realize that
before others defer to their leadership, they expect proof that this new boss is worthy of
deferece. Is an ostensible leader genuinely superior as testified to by victories in tests of
strength? Is she really stronger than others? Such tests will, therefore, be arranged.
Thus, subordinates frequently orchestrate them by engaging in what amounts to sabotage.
They fail to follow instructions or procrastinate in delivering results. Students, for
instance, don’t read assignments or talk to each other in class. Clerks may take
unauthorized breaks or will not fill out the required paperwork. In order to be respected,
a new boss has to deal with this insubordination. She has to demand compliance and
make it stick.

Consequently, many new bosses anticipate these trials and attempt to preempt
them. They frequently seek an opportunity to arrange tests of strength on their terms. A
simple way to accomplish this is by requiring a change in the way business is done and
then awaiting the reaction. This modification in operating procedures is usually over
something insignificant. But that is not the point. The objective is to provide an occasion
to enforce this dictate. The idea is to establish that one has the power to defeat subordinates who decide to launch a challenge. By arranging this lesson at the beginning of their relationship, the leader can achieve a reputation for strength that will serve well during crucial moments down the line. A teacher, for instance, might impose a snap quiz, then use the results to shame unprepared students with their scores. Often a single example of this sort is sufficient to send a message about who is in charge.

**Politics**

Politics has an even worse reputation than hierarchy. Most people assume that organizational politics is more of an aberration than is inequality. They believe that the best organizations feature rational exercises in achieving the objectives to which all are dedicated. When they encounter sub-groups vying for power, they conclude that these factions are in conflict with the overall purposes of their joint endeavor. Indeed, they often are. Whatever the pronouncements of political operatives, their actual goals usually have more to do with personal ambition than the needs of the larger enterprise.

Nevertheless, organizational politics is not superfluous. It is not an after-thought. Politics is crucial to the exercise of organizational power. Would-be leaders, who are not skilled at political maneuver, hardly ever arrive at the apex of power. Whatever their personal virtues, they are unlikely to emerge from tests of strength unscathed. The fact is that however competent an individual, he or she is apt to be inferior to an assemblage of others. In the long run, no person is stronger than a group committed of others.

Politics is about the creation and management of the interpersonal coalitions that exercise power. It is about assembling stable alliances that can be used to defeat competing alliances. Within large organizations, who gets to decide what is not left to
personal whim. Those who wish to exercise power do not merely seek personal advantage; they seek combinational advantage. By being part of a powerful group, and preferably at its summit, they enhance their strengths. Social isolates, on the other hand, tend to be discounted as non-entities. They are organizational nerds. Once upon a time, eggheads could be recognized by the slide rules dangling from their belts or the pen-protectors in their shirt pockets. Others knew they were smart, but also that they were socially inept. When the crunch came, these grinds might protest the unfairness of being disregarded, but they had nowhere to turn. All they could do was stammer out ineffectual complaints. The real powers were the ones who understood the significance of making friends. When they got into trouble, they recognized, and cultivated, those who would be there to help. Similarly, they ignored or punished those who would not. More than this, politically savvy operators thought ahead. They did not always wait upon events, but utilized their social insights to arrange conflicts to their advantage. Disciples of Nathan Beford Forrest, they sought to marshal their forces at the crucial location, appearing there “furstest with the mostest.” In other words, like good generals, they planned to assemble the greatest collective strength at the decisive point of combat. If not always in control of the largest army, by achieving either tactical or strategic supremacy, they acquired reputations for great power.

The sort of merit that gets translated into hierarchical dominance is not always technical. The professionalized expertise that results in interpersonal power is often social in nature. An ability to judge others perceptively, to communicate with them persuasively, or to cobble together rewards that attract broad allegiance can be more decisive than knowledge of how to program a computer. A reassuring smile, an
intimidating scowl, or a knack for assertive back scratching and inventive log rolling may seem like small matters. Yet these can make all the difference. Dwight Eisenhower was not a better general than George Patton. On the field of battle he was not as decisive, nor as personally inspirational. His grasp of mechanized tactics was not as vast, nor his bravado as impressive. But Eisenhower, not Patton, gained command of Operation Overlord. Eisenhower was the “political general.” His smile was warmer and his handshake more genuine. It was Eisenhower who could elicit Churchill’s cooperation by making compromises to meet his partner’s needs. It was Eisenhower who was the trustworthy ally to the English and a dependable subordinate to Marshall and Roosevelt. Sometimes thought of as too pliant to be a forceful leader, it was nevertheless he who oversaw the invasion of Europe and the defeat of the Nazis. His say so, not Bradley’s, set the assault on the Normandy beaches in motion; his mediation, not Patton’s, kept Montgomery in line.

The value of political reliability in obtaining hierarchical superiority is demonstrated in the career of William (Bill) Wallace. For many years it did not seem that this would be so, but politics is a long-term game. Bill is a soft-spoken person. At first impression, he does not seem to fit the stereotype of those who rise to the top of competitive organizations. Nor do his personal ethics seem suited to the take-no-prisoners tactics of governmental politics. A straight arrow by demeanor and disposition, he might appear to be a minnow among sharks. But this too would be deceptive. Doing the right thing is important to Bill, but not doing it naively. Behind his wry smile and gentle southern accent is a clear-eyed judge of human character. Bill’s personal commitments go back to his youth in rural Georgia. His father was a part-time Baptist
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minister, who, as a young man, participated in the Bataan death march. A B-17 tail
gunner in the Philippines at the outbreak of WWII, the Japanese captured the older
Wallace and held him captive for the duration. Later, he worked as an aircraft inspector
at Warner-Robbins Air Force base. Bill admired his father greatly, but was not so star-
struck that he could not recognize the older man’s feet of clay when he himself reached
maturity. Bill would one day attempt to apply the faith-based integrity he had been
taught, but seek to do so more consistently.

At first uncertain about his occupational directions, Bill eventually obtained a
bachelor’s degree in political science and a master’s degree in public administration.
Going to work for one university and then another, he rose to the position of director of
human resources. In this post, he functioned competently and collegially. Well liked by
his peers and subordinates, he initially enjoyed the favor of his superiors. Then fate
intervened. A faculty member, on his own initiative, distributed a survey instrument
among the faculty members. The results, when they were made public, came as a
thunderclap. The faculty almost unanimously registered an appreciation of the students.
They found them smart and well motivated. The faculty also liked other members of the
faculty. The found them professional and collegial. The surprise came in their attitude
toward the administration. They did not like or trust the administrators. They did not
believe their promises or place confidence in their intentions. To put the matter bluntly,
their consensus was that the administration was incompetent. This outcome had little
impact until the results of the survey fell into the hands of the school’s chief administer.
The president, who shall remain nameless, was shocked. She had invested enormous
energies in cultivating faculty good will. She had, for instance, made strenuous efforts to
reduce class size and improve faculty remuneration, evidently to no avail. This was intolerable. Something had to be done.

One of her strategies for repairing the damage was to solidify administrative fealty. Before proceeding to deal with the faculty, she wanted to be certain of the loyalties of her team. To this end, she arranged a series of meetings with important elements of the organizational leadership. Key managers were brought together in discussion groups under the direct supervision of the president. At one point, she stopped to ask that each to affirm a personal loyalty to her. Were they prepared to look her in the eye and state out loud that they were committed to her? Bill was invited to one of these sessions, where he too was asked to attest to his loyalty. Those who had gone before him dutifully pronounced their devotion. They knew that if they did not, there would be hell to pay. Bill too understood this. Even so, he could not bring himself to follow the script. When it came his turn, he quietly affirmed his loyalty not to the president, but the institution. Yes, he would perform his duty, but would do so in a manner consistent with the overall interests of the university. Bill knew enough to refrain from distinguishing the interests of the school from those of the president, but the damage was done. He had taken a stand, not as a team player, but as an independent spirit. Henceforth, he would be in the president’s doghouse. He even became vulnerable to threats of discharge. Candor, at this point, seemed to be a grave miscalculation.

This condition lasted for several years. Where previously Bill’s advice had been regularly sought, now he was isolated. Allowed to do his job, his influence waned. What the future would hold was uncertain, but for the present he had hit a dead-end.

Fortunately, Bill’s alliance building efforts were not confined to the school. As part of
his job, he was able to make contacts with administrators from other institutions. The process began when he encountered difficulty retaining Instructional Technology (IT) staff at his institution. At his personal initiative, Bill researched methods for solving this problem. He then devised a strategy to deploy the limited resources at his disposal more effectively. Two articles in national journals intended to disseminate this achievement followed. After it was clear these were well received, his own state’s board of regents contacted him. The president of his university might not have confidence in him, but they did. They came to regard him as an expert in IT recruitment and retention. In time, they instituted what came to be called The Wallace Plan. As a result, he was offered the position of Associate Vice Chancellor for Human Resources for the University System of the State of Georgia. This placed him at the head of the system’s health insurance program. Now in control of hundred’s of millions of dollars of assets, his status was far higher than it had previously been. Indeed, so high had he moved, and so powerful were his new colleagues, that his old associates went out of their way to honor him on his departure. A party was held to mark his send-off, during which sycophancy was the order of the day. What had been isolation was recast as lifelong devotion. Even the president, who had so recently segregated him, was astute enough to realize that it was in her interest to maintain an alliance with a former colleague now hobnobbing with the regents.

But Bill’s rise was not done. Nor was his self-initiated networking. As a competent straight-talking colleague, his participation in establishing state educational policy was highly valued. To begin with, he was good at his job. He proved his personal potency by saving the state tens of millions of dollars. Always levelheaded, he further
enhanced his expertise by learning as he went along. What he did not know, Bill investigated. What he investigated, he analyzed and experimented with. Moreover, what worked, Bill improved. And what did not, he changed. This may sound simple, but straightforward, trustworthy competence is not as widespread as one might hope. So unusual is it that many of the managers with whom he now associated sought him as an ally. They listened to him; they delegated projects to him. So widely appreciated was his reputation for honest competence that the governor appointed him to head a study committee. Bill was now asked to make recommendations for the reform of statewide operations. As co-chair of the State Health Benefit Plan Taskforce of The Commission for a New Georgia, he applied his experience far beyond his original domain. Politically inexperienced though he might once have been, he learned an important secret. Bill inadvertently discovered that being excluded from one political coalition does not mean automatic exclusion from every coalition. When social mobility is prevented in a one direction, it may be possible in others.

**Cheaters**

But what is relative strength? What is it really? Who deserves to be at the top of the political heap? Doesn’t everyone privately think that he or she should be regarded as the best? Tests of strength may seem to be a sensible means of sorting out who is more powerful than whom, but they are not infallible. People cheat. Since almost everyone wants to get ahead, the players do not always employ Marquis of Queensbury rules. As a consequence, virtue is not always rewarded. Those with the greatest merit do not inevitably rise to the top. Bill may have come out all right, but sometimes it is the cheaters who prevail. Lies are believed. Boastful pronouncements are taken at face
value. Unredeemed promises are treated as if they had been honored. In the real world, competent performances, as measured by effective action, are often trumped by an appearance of competence. Witness the triumphant career of Barack Obama. Not professionalized leadership, but a facade of it, frequently gains a reputation for superiority. Because we human beings are symbol users, we can be betrayed by what we are persuaded is true. We can be led to believe in what we think we see or assume we have heard, rather than what is so. As symbolic consumers, we sometimes react to indicators of strength rather than the genuine article.

If this seems bizarre, it must be remembered that victories in tests of strength are secured by inducing opponents to back down and that their long-term impact is sealed by inspiring a reputation for greater power. As a result, in order to move up a social hierarchy, it is frequently more beneficial to be believed to be stronger than actually to be stronger. This places a premium on effective manipulation. Those who are good at bluffing can convince others that winning is impossible and that, they should act according to the maxim that “discretion is the better part of valor.” When these charlatans spew forth streams of hyperbole, their listeners are taken in by these exaggerations. Potential opponents refuse to challenge them to a game of tennis because they have been seduced into believing they are up against the club champion. Similarly, when someone strides around apparently confident in his ability to win, others are likely to believe that he will win. They are deceived by the reputation for power in which the person himself seemingly believes and decide that a confrontation would be fruitless. In some ways, tests of strength are like games of poker. The player with the best hand does not always pick up the pot. Often it is the one with the best line of patter, the one most
skilled at serving up B.S., who prevails. Like harmless frogs that dress up in the colors of
poisonous toads, or chimpanzees that run around the forest tossing branches and
screaming as thunderously as they can, they are taken at face value.

So decisive can an ability to bluff be, that it pervades alliance structures. Political
teams too engage in deceptive tactics; playing what may be thought of as team poker.
Organizations of all types are susceptible to manipulation by demagogues and
ideologues. Demagogues manipulate what other people strive to obtain in order to
persuade the masses to treat them (the demagogues) like saviors. Ideologues manipulate
what others believe in order to persuade them that they (the ideologues) have the answers
to crucial questions. Millions of individuals are thereby convinced to seek imaginary
rewards or to proselytize for idealistic nonsense. Having been swayed by a charismatic
leader or recruited by a vigorous social movement, they enlist in attempts to assure others
of what is not true. A joint allegiance to socialism may, for instance, inspire the faithful
to Herculean efforts at persuading an electorate that socialism is possible. In claiming to
be the guardians of social justice, they divert attention from the terrible poverty produced
by real-life socialism. For team-building hucksters, and their fellow-traveling dupes, it
does not so much matter what is the case as what people are induced to believe is the
case. W.I. Thomas long ago taught us that what people believe to be real, is real in its
consequences. Even the most arrant myths can influence collective behavior. Once
many people really did believe the world is flat. This fact provides an opportunity for
charming rogues. They bite their lower lips and speak in a trembling voice, all the while
assuring vast audiences that if only they support the cause they (the rogues) are
espousing, inequality will be banished from the face of the earth.
Cheating is so integral to efforts at winning tests of strength that broad fields of chicanery beckon to would-be leaders. People are so strongly motivated to move up the social ladder that their ingenuity for deceit is boundless. One of the most common tools for surreptitious conquest is the secret deal. Think of the health care agreements made by the Obama administration. In seeking prospective allies, those who do not possess the resources to prevail in direct competition routinely skulk about in back hallways, where they will tell one person one story, a second another, and keep a third entirely in the dark. Like the United Nation’s officials in charge of the oil for peace program, they cooperate with the equivalent of Saddam Hussein to obtain a clandestine pecuniary advantage, or, reminiscent of American corporate leaders, provide covert kickbacks to Jesse Jackson’s cronies rather than endure civil rights protests. Open communications are supposed to be the lifeblood of democracies, but proprietary information often decides who will win an election or which products are featured on supermarket shelves. Keeping some secrets secret can bring substantial financial rewards from those who benefit from prospective legislation or monopolistic collusion. As should be well known, what politicians, or business people, declare in public does not always square with what they say in private. It is possible, for example, to promise tax cuts from one side of the mouth, then sponsor tax increases destined to bankroll behind-the-scenes collaborators from the other.

Perhaps more surprising are the punishments that some people endure, not because of their weaknesses, but as a consequence of their strengths. It might be assumed that bosses would always prefer competent subordinates. They would appear to benefit from having the tasks for which they are responsible performed expertly. But no, this is not always so. Bosses, it must be remembered, are human. They too engage in
tests of strength; hence they too can harbor insecurities about the outcomes. If they entertain doubts about their abilities, they may worry that their underlings might launch a successful challenge. Therefore, the more able the subordinate, the more likely it will seem that he or she might decide to displace the superior. In order to forestall this, bosses often hobble potential opponents before it is too late. Evaluations are low-balled, assignments are made more onerous, or insidious gossip is propagated. Indeed, one of the most accurate barometers of a leader’s competence is how well he or she tolerates the competence of team members. Leaders who are confident in their ability to rebuff challenges are less needful of undermining those in close proximity. They concentrate on achieving the group objectives rather than ensuring personal survival via Stalin-style purges.

Discussing these matters may seem cynical. Such candor might sound unduly pessimistic. In the South, the conventional wisdom advises that if you don’t have anything nice to say, you shouldn’t say anything at all. Denial is considered the polite option. Among young adults a comparable strategy for obscuring unpleasant truths is to embrace idealism. Rather than become embittered in the manner of their elders, they are determined to pursue utopian solutions. Cheating may be widespread in the older generation, but they sponsor reforms to make corruption obsolete. They believe that their future will consequently be far more scrupulous. In this, they are only partially correct. It is, of course, true that corruption can be reduced. History demonstrates it often has been. Nevertheless, human experience also reveals that it has never been eliminated. Human nature and social institutions are such that some cheating always lingers. Deception can be controlled, but it must also be endured. Those who would be
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successful, even in a professionalizing middle class world, must be able to recognize
when they have been manipulated. Then they have to be able to institute effective
counter-measures. Or, if they get stuck in an untenable situation, they must perceive
when it is time to move on. If the political situation makes winning tests of strength
impossible, the only answer may be migrating to a different local.

Sometimes cheating can be circumvented, not by moving elsewhere, but by
enlisting additional allies to one’s cause. Politics is a fluid game and this fluidity can be
turned to one’s advantage. At minimum, it is frequently necessary to institute a
psychological defense. People who blame themselves for what they cannot control,
impair their efforts at victory. To reproach oneself for ways of the world is essentially to
join one’s opponents in intimidating oneself. What is needed instead is not cynicism, but
social realism. Social mobility is facilitated by seeing things as they truly are. Would-be
winners must not give up fight for success just because they discover that cheating is
more rampant than they once believed. To the contrary, they must courageously,
vigorously, and intelligently pursue victories. They need to be resilient and flexible if
they are to be accorded the respect, and the decision-making independence, they desire.

Shortcuts

Social mobility is so attractive that millions of people are seduced by the lure of
potential shortcuts. They succumb to the blandishments of crusaders and counterfeit
reformers, who entice them with promises of an easy route to the top. These supposed
saviors are presumably privy to information others do not have. Claiming that there is a
mysterious back door to success, for instance, via an approach to making millions in real
estate, they paint a rosy picture. It is all so simple. Just follow their trouble-free
instructions and success is virtually assured. And people believe. They do so because they want to believe. Like almost everyone, they want to win, and to do so without exerting much effort. As significantly, they want a guarantee of success. The mere idea of entering a competition for social priority where failure is possible is intimidating. As a consequence, they back away from genuine tests of strength in the expectation that these can be short-circuited. They refuse to understand that in bailing out of the real world, they become the authors of their own disappointments.

For a professionalizing middle class, effortless shortcuts are usually cul-de-sacs. As society becomes ever more commercialized, skill at decentralized decision-making, in fact, becomes the strength de jure. If one is to best others in contests for status, establishing one’s self-motivated expertise is the central means of demonstrating personal superiority. Those who are not genuinely competent at tasks that need doing find they have difficulty persuading others to respect their authority. Eventually, they are exposed as social weaklings. In contrast, those who are good at what they do, that is, who can demonstrate self-directed leadership, achieve a reputation for strength. They earn their positions by evincing powers that are difficult to undercut because they are authentic. Nevertheless, such reputations must be achieved. It have to be earned. In the end, most winners prove that they can do what they claim to do by doing it. They allow themselves to be tested, and then survive these tests.

Close to two centuries ago Karl Marx propounded one of the most popular and enduring hierarchical shortcuts. His solution to the problem that some people win and others lose was to banish the idea of losing. In his world, everyone would be a winner. Every person would have complete freedom and complete security. Nor would anyone
be better than anyone else because everyone would be equal. This legerdemain was to be achieved by a single stroke. Marx and his proletarian allies would abolish private property. They would prevent elites from emerging by making it impossible to accumulate the wealth that enabled them to exercise superior power. First the government, then a revised version of human nature, would enforce universal equity. Ultimately making one’s way to the top would be effortless because everyone would already be there. In point of fact, this was a mirage. Property ownership cannot be abolished. It is part of human nature. Even when it is outlawed, it returns through a side door. The Russians found this out. Members of the communist party theoretically did not own their country dachas, but they behaved as if they did. Worse still, when everyone is a winner, no one is a winner. The notion that total equality is tantamount to universal success is self-contradictory. People want to be better than one another, hence when they are not, they feel like losers. In a Marxist world of total parity, the result of complete equality would not be total satisfaction. Most people would be disappointed at not being able to achieve social mobility. Hierarchy is, after all, a relative phenomenon. To have failed to move up in comparison with others is to have failed. In truth, being told everyone is as good as everyone else does not comfort actual human beings. They want to be better. They do not want to settle for mediocrity.

Besides, we human beings are innately impelled to engage in tests of strength. We all want to be important. Indeed, we want to be respected for being better than the next guy. The end product is continuous struggles for supremacy. Almost everybody wants to be superior to somebody. The effect of this can be seen in our school systems. They have fallen victim to the dual epidemics of grade and credential inflation. Because
most parents want their children to be the best, they demand good grades. This in turn places pressure on students to do well and for teachers to acknowledge their accomplishments. Once a gentleman’s C was considered the average college grade. No more. Nowadays not even a B is sufficient. Today everyone feels entitled to an A. But if everyone receives an A, how are the better students to be distinguished from the inferior ones? In many schools, the solution is to award A⁺’s, A’s and A⁻’s. Of course, this makes the A⁻ equivalent to an old-fashioned C. For some, receiving an A⁻ may seem a shortcut to the top, but because grades are relative this is deceptive. Everyone knows that A⁻ is not really the best. The same is true of educational credentials. There was a time when a high school diploma put a person at the head of the job-hunting pack. But when high school diplomas became the norm, it was necessary to obtain a college diploma to be eligible for the best jobs. Of course, with college diplomas now the norm, being better than others requires a master’s degree. Paradoxically, escalating the mandatory credential obviates the notion that everyone can be best merely by receiving an advanced education. Since social precedence is comparative, it quickly develops that not everyone can be best in an environment where the go-getters are continuously raising the stakes.

For others, for those who are not academically inclined, the educational rat race has never been alluring. Many of them have sought a shortcut to status via celebrity. They believe that if they become famous, this will make them more noteworthy than others. Their dream is stardom in rock and roll, on the silver screen, or on the athletic field. Success in these derives, to be sure, from tests of strength over particular talents. In fact, they often feature intense competitions over relative abilities. Nevertheless, many
would-be stars aspire to instant fame. They believe in the mythology of inherent genius. Their assumption is that they are endowed with special gifts, which a just world must eventually recognize. That talent is widely distributed is no part of their calculations. Nor is the fact that celebrity is not interchangeable with social status. They do not realize that to be well known is not identical with being respected; that the tests of strength needed to become a hip-hop artist are not the same as those required of doctors or lawyers. Nor can money per se compensate for the disrepute that attaches to gangster rap. Avenues to success these may be, but they are also self-limiting.

Another reputed shortcut to success, but this time grounded in the political arena, is affirmative action. As is well known, society has not treated everyone fairly. Members of some minority groups, most notably African-Americans, have been barred from success. Whatever their personal virtues, others have combined to prevent their social mobility. Blacks, Hispanics, and at one time the Jews and the Irish, have forcibly been excluded from certain jobs, neighborhoods, and relationships. No doubt, there have been injustices. No doubt too, these need to be corrected. The question is can affirmative action achieve this. Can it remove social roadblocks by placing people in the hierarchical positions they deserve? Affirmative action seeks to achieve this sort of realignment directly and consciously. Members of excluded groups are to be placed where they belong—by governmental fiat. The model seems to be what happened in sports a generation ago. Once upon a time the major league teams were lily white. Segregation was the order of the day. Even a Satchel Page was not allowed to pitch for the nation’s most prominent clubs. He was forced to confine his talents to the Negro Leagues. This color line was broken when Branch Ricky intentionally recruited Jackie
Robinson to play with the Brooklyn Dodgers. Ricky, as it were, plucked up Robinson and put him where he belonged, irrespective of the wishes of the bigots. The same strategy has now been attempted in higher education and business.

But higher education is not major league baseball. Instituting quotas to bring the percentage of blacks in college in line with their proportion of the population cannot work the same way. Robinson, when he was brought to Ebbets Field, had to earn his stripes on the baseball diamond. He was required to win tests of strength against other players with his bat and glove. The same may be thought to occur in the groves of academe, but this is not always the case. Exercises in sponsored mobility cannot win tests of strength for those who are unprepared to fend for themselves. Thus, students who are awarded slots in competitive universities without having demonstrated academic ability are essentially thrown to the lions. They may be allowed admission, but if they cannot keep up their classroom grades, they wind up on the street. Moreover, if this effect is countered by awarding them unearned grades, once they graduate others regard their degrees as counterfeit and hence they have difficulty obtaining good jobs. A win that is not a win, in the long run is not a win. It is self-deception, or, more accurately, social deception.

The same sort of illusory shortcut occurs in business when affirmative action dictates the employment of otherwise unqualified applicants. When women, or minority members, are hired in order to fulfill an artificial quota (or goal) the consequence is not to raise their social status. They may be given good jobs in terms of title and remuneration, but not power. Power that cannot be defended cannot be exercised. A person who is appointed to an authoritative position, but is unable to prevail in the tests of strength will
end up a figurehead. Such a person may have hoped to be a respected winner, but respect is withheld from those who have not earned it. For them, affirmative action is a cruel hoax. It is a promise that by its very nature cannot be kept. Nor can related strategies such as “comparable worth.” When the government defines some jobs to be as valuable as others and therefore to be compensated alike, it artificially skews the job market. If it says that secretaries, who are female, are to be paid as much as janitors, who are male, in the end they will get more secretaries than are needed, and fewer janitors. The worth of jobs is not inherent. It is determined by tests of strength in the marketplace. Competition, not moral intuition, decides pay scales. It is the results of fair competition that stabilize relative status.
Chapter 7

Love and Marriage

Sophistication

My mother and I were sitting together at the Tampa airport. The Thanksgiving celebration at my brother’s place had come to an end and she was headed home. It was one of those moments when we were both prepared to wax nostalgic. Quietly and earnestly, we began to talk about the old days. Her husband, my father, the man to whom she had been married for almost fifty years, was dead for almost a decade. Gone too was the special friend she had made in the interim. Al had been a nice man. A pharmacist by training and experience, he was both more sophisticated and gentler than my father. What was more, his mature urbanity was something of which my mother had dreamed. When she was still a teenage bride this is what she imagined her new, decade older, husband to be. Indeed, when I came along she named me Melvyn with a “y” in emulation of the actor Melvyn Douglas. He was her idea of Jewish worldliness and clearly what she hoped I would become.

Now, as we sat talking, she leaned forward and said something I had not anticipated. With a faint misting in her eyes, and her head softly shaking back and forth, she whispered, apropos of nothing previously said, “You know son, I don’t know what your father saw in me.” This was not something I had ever heard from her. Whatever the difficulties in their marriage, I assumed my parents knew why they married. But my mother, at this point, a tiny gray-haired woman in her early eighties, continued. She talked about how she had been a gangly little girl when he was the grown-up son of the next-door neighbors. He had a good paying job in the midst of the Great Depression and
was, from her perspective, a man of the world. Sounding ever more wistful, she wondered aloud why he wanted to date and later marry her. Listening to this litany I could not help marveling that she had never spoken of these matters with her husband. Although I kept quiet, it seemed strange that a husband and wife would never openly discuss the sources of their attraction.

In fact, I should not have been surprised. Later in the day a recalled a conversation I had with my mother when I was a teenager. Getting ready to embark on the adventure of dating, I could not help speculating about where this would lead. Seeking help in deciphering what was to come I asked her how I would know when I met the right girl. She seemed somewhat nonplussed by this query, but after a short pause, she produced an answer. All she said was, “You’ll just know.” That’s it: “You’ll just know.” Needless to say I was disappointed. But what was there to do? This was apparently the best she could muster. Indeed, it was indicative of the mentality of her generation. For my mother and her peers love was a mystery. It was something that simply happened to people. Love was romantic; it was not an intellectual exercise. Furthermore, I’m sure that had she asked her mother the same question, she would have received an even more abrupt response. Grandma Lizzie would have dismissed the inquiry as silly and then turned her back so as to concentrate on the meal cooking over the stove. After all, when my mother experienced her first menses, all she received upon seeking her mother’s consolation was a slap across the face.

To gauge the mindset of my mother’s generation, one has but to examine the movies she and her friends attended. These were veritable festivals of empty-headed romanticism. Rarely, if ever, did they candidly dissect the realities of intimate
relationships. What they offered instead was a grab bag of myths and platitudes.
Representative of the then current genres was the Thin Man series. Ostensibly an amusing journey into the adventures of a dilettante detective and his well-to-do wife, it featured William Powell and Myrna Loy in the principal roles. As Nick and Nora Charles, they played what was meant to be a super-sophisticated modern couple. Given to witty repartee, their patter served as a model of marital bliss for millions of Depression era moviegoers. In retrospect, however, their escapades were a celebration of naïveté. Their life together depicted marriage as nothing less than a movable cocktail party. Connubial happiness was guaranteed by a martini in the hand, a sarcastic quip upon the lips, and a pitcher full of additional martinis upon the table. All this, of course, occurred without a hint of drunkenness. When the chips were down, Nick and Nora were always sufficiently sober to solve the problem at hand.

To give a further sense of the unreality of the series, among the incidents thought to be amusing was a scene with Nick taking his young son for a walk by guiding him along on a leash. This apparently commendable parent also sought to entertain his child by reading to him from the racing form. Meanwhile, Nora, the model woman, made nary a disparaging comment about Nick’s less than admirable personal habits. It was another matter, however, when the two discussed third parties. Their faults were regularly subjected to mild ridicule. Between themselves, Nick and Nora engaged in introspective ventures no more searching than did my parents. To the contrary, their concerns tended to be externalized. Nora worried, for instance, that Nick’s physician father did not respect his son’s investigative skills as much as he should, while Nick fretted over the shallow snobbishness of Nora’s wealthy relatives. Oddly, Nora was not offended by
Nick’s jejune insults of her clan. Although it was her inherited assets that enabled him to live a life of aimless superficiality, she joined him in these diatribes, albeit more gently. In real life, it is probable that a dismissal of her kin would have gotten under her skin. Sooner or later she would have objected to abusing the source of their revenue, especially since these slurs reflected on her. Instead, this allegedly liberated woman sought nothing more than to shadow her husband as he engaged in his sleuthing activities.

My parents loved the Charles.’ As intended, they regarded them as the height of sophistication. What worried them most was not that they modeled a marital fantasy, but that they (my parents) could not emulate such clever banter in real life. Forced to interact without the aid of a written script, the adroit phrases of their idols did not pop into their heads. My parents were less influenced by the presumably even more sophisticated literary paragons of their era. They may have heard of the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay and the novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald, but had not read their works. They surely would not have been able to quote Millay’s immortal verse: *My candle burns at both ends; It will not last the night; But, ah my foes, and, oh, my friends—It gives a lovely light.*

Nor would they have known that while young she lived a bohemian Greenwich Village life as wild as that of which she wrote. Nor would they have realized that it finally caught up with her in the form of a heart attack while she was still in her fifties. Fitzgerald would have been better known. He was, after all, a celebrity. Described by some as the literary spokesman of the jazz age, they would have been aware of *The Great Gatsby.* As a cynical portrait of the American Dream, the latter both faulted and celebrated the life of wealthy excess. It did not, however, endorse marital stability. Nor did the febrile quest for fame that obsessed Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda. Yet in the end,
they too succumbed to their untamed ways. Zelda wound up in a psychiatric hospital and Scott died of a heart attack at the age of 44. Nevertheless, they exemplified the ethos of the period as an idealized version of the good life. They may have burned out at an early age, but had a wonderful time doing so.

Samuel and Florence Fein had no intention of following the lead of either Millay or the Fitzgeralds, but neither did they derive useful insights from them. Were they looking for guidance on how to establish a durable marriage, they would have found counsel from these sources of less value than the limited assistance they received from their parents. The point is that they were not alone in this dilemma. The roaring twenties may have been long on bathtub gin, but they were short on information about interpersonal intimacy. Nor were the dismal thirties much better for the naïvely lovelorn. These years focused on scratching out a living, not pursuing dyadic introspection. My parent’s generation, and that of their parents, found none of this surprising. For them, marriage was not something to be dissected; it was something to be tolerated. You found a potential partner, you dated, you married, you had children, and you lived happily ever after. Wasn’t that what the fairytales promised? You definitely did not worry that the literary crowd was fixated on promoting liberation from traditional relationships. They were not your crowd; hence their doings were more entertaining than inspirational. Nor did you agonize over the fanciful exploits of the movies; they were intended to be escapist. They took your mind off your troubles. Thus, my father loved Myrna Loy. One of the highlights of his early life was installing the air conditioning unit in her Manhattan apartment. But he did not expect to marry a movie star like her. She was too ethereal for an ordinary person such as himself. By the same token, he did not expect to
have a Myrna Loy style marriage. Hollywood was to be admired, not emulated. It was glamorous, not informative.

Curiously, this unreality did little damage. The traditional patterns of marriage were still firmly entrenched. Most newlyweds thought they knew what they were getting into, and if the didn’t, their families and friends were close at hand to instruct them on the missing elements. Few people were so independent as to escape pressures to follow the standard models. They did what they believed everyone did, or they endured the critical gossip of the neighbors until they mended their ways. Today, things have changed. Marriage has been under assault for decades. The free love reformers of the roaring twenties may not have influenced many relationships, but they laid the groundwork for the epidemic of divorces that gained traction by the lackluster fifties. Where once marriage was a foregone conclusion, it became optional. Both men and women learned they could survive quite comfortably without subjecting themselves to entangling matrimonial alliances. On their own, both genders could earn enough to support themselves. On their own, with modern contraceptives close by, they could engage in sex without fear of parenthood. If they wanted to marry, that was up to them. If they didn’t, there would be little arm-twisting. Although most continued to marry, both husbands and wives kept an eye open for better opportunities.

With the advent of the Middle Class Revolution, the ground rules changed. Tradition was no longer celebrated for its own sake. What is more, with these changes came unprecedented demands. Heterosexual intimacy became voluntary. Individuals were compelled to take control of their personal relationships to a degree not possible for their ancestors. Yet with this autonomy came responsibility for making their alliances
work. Where before a lack of choice forced people to endure uncomfortable living arrangements, it was now up to them to make their liaisons more inviting. In short, if they were going to have satisfying marriages, they were required to become expert at constructing them. Working together with another human being, typically of the opposite sex and therefore someone with different wants and needs, it was necessary to develop attachments that were mutually satisfying. Living together in relatively isolated nuclear families, they needed to hammer out, and enforce; the rules that they, and their children, would to live by.

Professionalism is usually thought of in occupational terms. Even so, the personal sphere too demands a self-motivated expertise. What we do in the privacy of our homes, or when out socializing with friends, may be more spontaneous and less scientific. Still, if we are to be individually successful in these activities, it is incumbent upon us to become specialized in them. If, for instance, we want voluntary intimacy to work, it is up to each of us to be competent private decision-makers. To do less, to let the chips fall where they may, is to abandon our fate to traditional models. Personal relationships, however, need not be mysterious. It is possible to understand how they operate. People who wish to have their needs met can dedicate themselves to learning what intimacy entails, then devoting themselves to applying these lessons.

When it comes to marriage, contemporary couples have to be sophisticated in a manner my parents were not. They must know why they enter particular liaisons. What, they need to ask themselves, are their motives for choosing to get close to one person rather than another? They also have to know what they must do in order to maintain intimate bonds. How are they to sustain cordial relations with someone with whom they
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couples that marriage must be worked at. This, in fact, is more than a cliché. Love is
neither automatic nor effortless. It is not, as my mother implied, something that every
person instinctively knows. In the end, it wasn’t even intuitive for her. It is less so for
inhabitants of an increasingly complex techno-commercial environment.

Stable marriages are rarely contracted with one’s eyes closed. Nor does love
conquer all. Despite the comforting bromides of yesteryear, if couples are to live in
harmony, they must understand what goes into living peacefully together. They cannot
trust to finding the perfect soul mate with whom the details of their partnership can be left
unspoken. Nor can they assume that sex will be so potent an adhesive as to obviate
whatever frictions develop. Rather, they must invest time and effort in learning how
intimacy operates. They must also be emotionally invested in making it work. Love is
not for children. Nor is it for the emotionally immature. To become professionalized in
one’s private life requires that one grow up. It also means moving beyond the romantic
ignorance of pre-middle class eras. Instead of doing what comes naturally, or following
the lead of celluloid couples, sizeable doses of intelligence and courage are mandatory.
Lest it be forgotten, Myrna Loy, the perfect cinematic wife, was, in real life, a multiple
divorcee.

Getting Real

People still go to the movies and they still take cues from their matinee idols. But
they also follow other potent role models. Today fictional relationships enter almost
every household in the form of television programs. Nearly twenty-four hours a day,
viewers can be regaled by the fantasies purveyed by the entertainment industry. Thus,
not long ago they could, if they are interested in modern dating customs, tune in to *Elimidate*. This pseudo-edifying concoction of alleged reality television put a man together with several nubile young women so that he could select the one that best met his ideal. These young ladies then vied to capture his imagination. Normally this entailed presenting themselves as being more sexually adventurous than their rivals. To achieve this, many dressed like aspiring prostitutes and spoke a racy dialect of potty-mouth. Typically these young, attractive women competed not only to see who could be the most seductive, but who could most creatively undercut the others. Outrageous insults and titillating innuendos were the order of the day. So were leering asides made by the young man. All of these indignities doubtless made for good television. They were clearly a voyeurs delight. Evidently, viewers, in the safety of their living rooms, could sneer at the exhibitionistic excesses of these would-be celebrities. What they could not obtain, beyond the arousal of the moment, was sound guidance on how to choose a mate. Those who date in the manner of Elimidate may become more skilled in arranging one-night stands or catching an STD, but not in achieving love.

Several decades ago another popular television dating show took a different tack. *The Dating Game* asked a young man or woman to select one of three contestants with whom to go out on a date. The three choices were out of view and therefore not chosen for their appearances. Instead they were posed a series of questions. It was from their answers that the chooser was to derive a decision. The Dating Game was not highbrow entertainment. Both the questions and answers tended to be superficial. They were about things like where you would take a person on a date or what animal you would be if you could be any animal at all? Nevertheless, these were questions and answers. The players
attempted to present themselves as attractive, and sexually enticing, human beings, not merely meat-market hard-bodies. At least part of the time, they spoke in terms of internal qualities. They were saying, in effect, I am this kind of person; not just a potential one-night stand (albeit that too). Trivialities and innuendo were in evidence, but so was the notion that dates were between people, not sex organs. The search for interpersonal compatibility had not yet completely descended into a teenage boy’s idea of physical congruence.

If my parents inhabited a world where public conceptions of love were romantic and shallow, then the contemporary burgeoning of electronic media has fostered a new sort of romanticism. Appearances have become ever more important in an atmosphere where people are daily bombarded with them. Today love is often confused with hard bodies and outsized bosoms. The ideal companion is not witty or urbane, as per the Thin Man, but someone with a flat stomach and pierced navel. Athleticism, as opposed to emotional depth, is the most admired attribute. Presumably the better the muscle tone, the better the bedroom gymnastics. Then too, there is the concept of the “beautiful person.” Paris Hilton is a willowy sylph with a lovely face, yet that, plus her money and exhibitionism, has been enough to vault her into media stardom. Famous for being famous, ordinary people crowd around just to get a glimpse of her. Young boys dream of finding a girl as attractive and young girls aspire to be as striking. Being juvenile, they do not consider what might be needed to sustain an enduring affiliation. They assume that physical attraction trumps all else. Like the gatekeepers at trendy nightclubs, they look people over to determine if the outside package is sufficiently stylish. If it is, they allow the person to participate of the wild revelries that make up the good life.
Yet nightclubs are not the best places to meet a potential mate. Celebrants who
are pickled in alcohol, and perhaps bathed in drugs, are not likely to be good judges of
character. Out on the dance floor furiously gyrating to show off their body parts, they are
not apt to see into each other’s souls. What they notice is a glitzy surface. Intent on
razzle-dazzling one another, they are indeed razzle-dazzled. They engage in what Erving
Goffman called impression management. The goal is to be perceived as favorably as
possible; in this case, in terms of what is currently fashionable. This, however, is not a
sound foundation for cultivating enduring relationships. Long term associations, if they
are to be stable and satisfying, need to be based on who the participants are, not just who
they appear to be. The first step in achieving love is finding the right person with whom
to achieve it. A professionalized self, that is, one who is looking for reciprocal affection,
must be expert in separating the sheep from the goats. Nowadays people talk about
dating as involving kissing a lot of frogs before finding a prince or princess.
Nevertheless, it is virtually impossible to get beyond the frog stage if someone cannot tell
the difference between a prince and a frog. If surface appearances are all that one goes
by, then almost any amphibian can give a credible imitation of an aristocrat.

A piece of advice that most amateur romantics tend to eschew is that it is better to
be disliked for who one is than to be liked for who one is not. Because they dread never
finding true love, many people hope to fool a suitable candidate into believing that they
are better than they are. Once they get this other person trapped in a committed
relationship, they can drop the mask, but remain attached. Only this is a canard. In
coming out warts and all, they frequently find that the other feels betrayed and decides
that forever after does not really mean forever after. Or, if they manage to keep up the
charade, they receive a facsimile of love that is not a love of who they really are. But how satisfying is that? How comforting can it be to wake up every day secretly knowing that this other would be repelled if he or she knew the truth? Genuine love is about being loved for oneself. It is about two human beings accurately perceiving each other, but accepting and liking one another nevertheless. True love may not mean never having to say one is sorry, but it does mean never having to pretend that you are someone other than who you are.

But how do two people get real with each other when getting real can be an invitation to rejection. Rejection, as almost every adolescent learns, hurts. No one likes to be regarded as a frog, hence when another person screws up her (or his) face as if to indicate that her lips have just touched something slimy, the rebuff can be devastating. To find the right person not only takes skill in judging another’s merits; it also takes perseverance. To find love, in an environment where love is voluntary, and where potential mates are numerous, takes intestinal fortitude. Participating in the real dating game, requires the internal motivation to endure a plethora of unfortunate encounters. Years ago, the sociologist Willard Waller introduced the notion of rating-dating. He observed that modern lovers use dating to appraise potential prospects. They go out with, not one, but many members of the opposite sex, in hopes of determining their preferences. This process has become so familiar as to be almost beneath notice. Yet it needs to be noticed if people are to be expert at implementing it. They have to understand what they are doing, if they are do it competently.

For starters, they must recognize that in dating they are not seeking the best available partner. The goal is not to find someone better than oneself, but someone
whose assets are on a par with one’s own. Love is something that occurs between equals. One of the semi-jokes to which novice daters are exposed is that it is just as easy to fall in love with a rich person as a poor one. The idea is that social mobility is facilitated by developing a relationship with someone who is already on a higher rung of the social ladder. This sounds good, but is fallacious. Love is about being comfortable with another person. It is about being able to kick off your shoes and use the grammar that comes naturally. Love is not about worrying that an obviously superior partner will judge one to be inferior. Spouses who must forever be concerned about placating a judgmental companion are unlikely to relax and share their true feelings. Constantly in fear of not being good enough, they seek to keep up a deception that is almost sure to break down. As singer Billy Joel once opined, it is not a good idea to have to work so hard in a relationship. No one has that much energy or discipline.

No, the goal is not to find someone better—or worse—but someone on a comparable level. One of the best examples of this sort of parity is offered by relative intelligence. Despite myths about seeking ditzy blonds, men really tend to fall in love with women as intelligent as themselves. Why indeed, would they want a wife too obtuse to understand them when, at the end of the day, they wish to unburden themselves? Conversely, why would a spouse want a partner given to criticizing her for her intellectual failings? What fun would that be? Much more satisfying is understanding and being understood. Mind you, social parity does not necessarily mean uniformity. Equivalent assets can be utilized to establish a comparable worth, as when the husband is rich and his wife is beautiful. Here each one has something of value to
give and receive. The objective, in this case, is a state where neither can lord it over the other, and where each can feel that he or she has made a fair bargain.

Another area in which compatibility is essential is with respect to personal values. In trying to understand what dating is about a question that frequently arises concerns which is more important—personal similarities or complementary differences. Do opposites attract or are shared interests of paramount significance? The answer is that it is a little of both. Nonetheless, when it comes to values, it is similarities that matter. A couple whose moral commitments are diametrically opposed are bound to tear apart. If one believes in honesty, whereas the other does not, the battles over lies are apt to be monumental. Likewise, if one wants a large family and the other does not, discussions over whether to use birth control are likely to be contentious. As a consequence, dating must be used to determine a potential partner’s fundamental allegiances. The hopes and dreams of both parties must, therefore, be a major focus of their interactions.

Courtship starts with two people sizing each other up to determine where they stand relative to one another. Beginning as strangers in a world dominated by impersonal relationships, they must first get to know each other, and to know each other well. Even so, and despite their ultimate need to get real, they cannot help but approach each other by engaging in impression management. Were they not to do so, were they to decide not to put a good face on their respective attributes, they would endure the handicap of looking worse compared with the competition. Thus, rather than be overlooked at this initial stage, each cleans up prior to going out and both watch their p’s and q’s as they feel each other out. Many, if not most of their initial rendezvous, at some point, entail eating out at a restaurant. This is no accident. The purpose of this custom is to facilitate
biography swapping. Strangers need a safe environment within which to share sensitive facts about themselves. Since they do not know each other, they have to find a non-threatening place to apprise each other of their respective histories, concurrent relationships, and personal goals. The first details that emerge are, of course, bound to be flattering. They tend to be about one’s past achievements and projected triumphs. It would not do to lead off with stories about how one screwed up in high school or how one will probably have difficulty being promoted next spring. This sort of information would be off-putting; hence is not the best way to elicit a stranger’s interest.

Eventually, however, honesty must prevail. The truth must be revealed. Still, it has to do so in a balanced way. Few human beings are perfect. Each party will, therefore, possess unacknowledged liabilities. Each will also fear rejection should these be admitted. Yet they must be admitted if mutual knowledge is to be achieved. The result is that they are disclosed slowly and carefully. Each party divulges elements of a personal failing and then awaits the reception. If there is immediate shock and a hasty retreat, this relationship may be over. It may also be scuttled if the other sits in quiet judgment, and then offers nothing in return. When one person, in effect, provides the other a baseball bat with which he (or she) might be beaten around the head or shoulders, the other is expected to provide a similar weapon. The objective is moral equivalency. It cannot be the case that one person is allowed to be the good one, whereas the other becomes the bad one. If there is to be social equality, the parties must establish that they are on a comparable level. Yet to do so, they must share embarrassing secrets in a balanced manner. Doing less would be an insult. It would imply the superiority of the
taciturn party. Even so, candid sharing presupposes the courage to be vulnerable, which
is not easy, especially with a stranger.

There is another obstacle to successful biography swapping. People may have
difficulty divulging personal truths of which they are unaware. Deeply concerned with
defending their integrity from external assaults, their authentic identities may be obscured
by repression. Embarrassed by their actual feelings and limitations, these are thrust into
the unconscious. The origin of this practice probably lies in having one’s weaknesses
used against one. People discover that the best protection is to hide their faults so
effectively that not even they can penetrate them. But if self-knowledge is not possible;
neither is interpersonal knowledge. Clearly, it is difficult for a partner to discern what a
person does not.

Despite this conundrum, good relationships are founded on valid interpersonal
understandings. Secrets, however well camouflaged, have a way of being found out.
More particularly, that which makes a person angry or frightened is apt to be expressed in
intimate relationships. Indeed, the more profound the repressed truths, the more strongly
they will press for release. Under these circumstances, the partner may sooner or later be
accused of a misdeed actually committed by someone from the accuser’s earlier life.
Recriminations emerge that have nothing to do with a current transgression, and which,
because they cannot be solved in the here and now, drive a wedge between the parties. In
other words, a couple with deeply buried secrets is predisposed to brawling endlessly
over a series of irritating issues without realizing what they are fighting about.

The antidote to this dilemma is personal archeology. People engaged in a process
of getting to know each other must start by attempting to know themselves. They need to
dig into the most obscure recesses of their individual histories so as to uncover what is not immediately apparent. But this is not easy. Some of the secrets will be frightening. Some may be mortifying. Yet there is no one that can do this for them other than themselves. Private arcana is, of its very nature, private. Information about our personal lives is per force concealed within each of us; hence only we can lead the search to uncover it. Others can help, but they cannot function as substitutes. Each individual must separately muster the courage to be personally honest prior to being interpersonally honest. Moreover, achieving this self-knowledge also facilitates knowledge of a partner’s inner self. An awareness of how our own selves function provides clues as to how others function. It suggests what is really happening deep inside rather than passively accepting impression management at face value.

In addition, but not inconsequentially, accurate internal knowledge allows us to understand what we are seeking from an intimate partner. In selecting between a myriad of potential mates, it is vital to identify how to rank specific attributes. Is beauty an important criterion, or personal integrity, or a sense of humor, or an adventurous spirit, or maternal qualities, or artistic talent? Even the folks at eHarmony.com understand this. They realize that what matters is not what others think attractive, but what the parties privately think. Personal archaeology can reveal genuine priorities, whereas a failure to dig beneath the surface is often disclosed in a succession of disappointments. In these instances, what we thought we wanted is contradicted by dissatisfaction with what we actually get. If this is so, then growing up prior to selecting a potential mate is a crucial precursor to serious dating. It is a vital part of personal professionalism; a vital form of interpersonal expertise.
Still, this is not all there is to the courtship process. There is also the crucial matter of developing interpersonal trust. Intimacy is of necessity dangerous. In allowing people to get close enough to provide emotional warmth, they are permitted close enough to commit emotional and physical injuries. One’s partner does not have to be a Lorena Bobbitt or Scott Peterson for bad things to happen. While corporal abuse is likely less common than the media would lead us to believe, emotional abuses are probably more widespread. Intimate partners get to know each other’s secret vulnerabilities, which permits them to avail themselves of this knowledge when fighting for their own safety. It is not unusual for people who feel threatened to launch preemptive strikes. They may not intend to inflict harm, but they lacerate the other’s ego nonetheless. So what is the appropriate corrective? What aspect of professionalism can prevent intimate partners from converting closeness into a battleground? Here it is not so much social expertise that counts as the appropriate internal motivation. Each of the parties must be motivated to do no harm. Just as with the physician’s Hippocratic Oath, they must be privately dedicated to refraining from inflicting damage. It is this, and only this, that makes them trustworthy. It is consequently this that must be ascertained before committing to a lifelong attachment.

Much of the courtship process is dedicated not only to learning if the other is trustworthy, but to proving whether he or she is trustworthy. Mutual trust is so pivotal to a satisfactory relationship that it cannot be left to chance. Another person may at first seem to be kindly, yet under pressure will resort to unfair defensive tactics. How then can one be sure? The answer is that the other must be tested. It is not sufficient to accept his or her word, or even to go by casual observations. It is necessary to go beyond these
to arrange circumstances that put the other’s dedication to fairness on trial. A partner may, for instance, be told a secret to see if he or she will keep it. Or the other may be given a difficult assignment to determine how well his patience holds up. The exact nature of these tests is indeterminate. The details depend on the imagination of the couple. Indeed, many of these exercises are unconsciously arranged. —Yet they must be arranged. And they need to be arranged over a considerable period of time. One of the reasons that love at first sight is a prescription for disaster is that it does not allow a long enough period to discover exceptions to a person’s apparent trustworthiness. Given that all of us have many aspects to our personalities, ascertaining the full range of these takes time.

If all goes well, if the other person is someone whose qualities are attractive and whose trustworthiness is beyond question, what follows is apt to be the infatuation stage. This is the part of courtship that is frequently confused with love itself. Infatuation is, in fact, a wonderful sensation. It is an internal state that makes a person feel as if he or she is floating on air. It is a condition that converts the loved object into someone who seems perfect. Infatuation tends to bathe the whole world in a flattering light, but it is the prospective partner that comes out looking the best. Just being near this other elicits warm feelings that seem almost miraculous. So strange do these appear that love songs forever ask how a paramour can do such magic. Why does his or her touch send a jolt of electricity through one’s spine? Why does her kiss make it irrelevant if one ever gets to see another baseball game again? Only an extraordinary person could have such an effect. There must be something very unusual about him or her.
Perhaps. But perhaps not. In reality, what is unusual about infatuation has more to do with the nature of interpersonal attachments than this particular object of desire. The purpose of infatuation is to rearrange the lover’s internal commitments. Their respective passions help reorganize their priorities and create an emotional bond between them. It is this emerging connection that is the core of a love relationship. It is what makes them more important to each other than are equally attractive strangers. If, indeed, voluntary intimacy is to be maintained, each must genuinely care about the other. Each must have become someone who genuinely wants to be close to this particular other. This is what infatuation achieves.

Nevertheless, infatuation is not magic. Its emotional excesses do not last forever. Those who believe that love conquers all seem to imagine that the glow of the courtship stage can be indefinitely sustained. They seem to believe that being in love means being eternally indifferent to hunger pangs. It does not. Long-term relationships are less pyrotechnical. They could not be as intense if the parties are to survive. No one has that much energy. Yet some people think that unless the fires of passion are licking at the ceiling they must have flickered out. As a result, they play games in order to revive their ardor. Or, failing this, they turn elsewhere to rejuvenate their fervor. Needless to say, such diversions are unlikely to solve the periodic problems that turn up in the best of relationships. Professionalized selves cannot afford to be infatuation junkies. Their expertise has to include a knowledge that genuine love follows predictable cycles. Juvenile romantics, chasing impossible dreams of perpetual enthusiasm, sooner or later sabotage their own aspirations. In the movies and on television the heroes and heroines are frequently obsessed with keeping their libidos in high gear. In real life, voluntary
intimacy depends on more reliable commitments. In real life, winners attempt to do the doable.

**Now in this Corner**

In John Ford’s classic movie *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, Victor McLaughlin’s Irish sergeant remarks to John Wayne that the ingénue and the juvenile lead will, after they are married, make a “fine, boisterous couple.” The two young people have just been bickering, and, as in many of Ford’s films, it is assumed that their married life will be characterized by the knockdown, drag-out brawls of most husbands and wives. Ford understands that the bliss of the infatuation stage of courtship does not last, but he also believes that the impending conflicts between spouses can be ferocious. Moreover, he apparently approves of passionate arguments. For him, marriage is like a boxing match. As long as the parties abide by the rules, they are allowed to put hands on one another. In many of Ford’s films, this goes so far as to encourage husbands to spank their wives if they get too independent. The women themselves are depicted as preferring men masculine enough to play this role. They want their husbands to show them who is in charge.

Nowadays, however, few of us would agree with these attitudes. Most people understand that married couples have their differences, and that these have to be resolved, but the preferred means of doing so have been radically amended. One alternative to Ford’s model is the *I Love Lucy* format. In their classic sitcom, Lucille Ball as Lucy and Desi Arnaz as Ricki are always having misunderstandings. Yet Desi never lays a hand on Lucy. In most cases, it is she who attempts to manipulate him into doing what she wants. In more than one episode she dons a costume, that somehow he fails to penetrate, in order
to insinuate herself into one of his shows. Often he is fooled, but even when he is not, he, with amused condescension, allows her to get her way. Much more rare on television, as rare as in a Ford film, are a husband and wife who sit down to quietly reason out their differences. Mature adults, who respect each other’s maturity, are evidently boring. In some contemporary sitcoms, such as *Everybody Loves Raymond*, the marital discussions are more to the point. The spouses have genuine tug-o-wars over what to do. But these are still comedies. The protagonists may have more than one dimension, but not much more. They still respond to one another with childish outbursts. Nevertheless, these contretemps come to a peaceful conclusion. On television, husbands and wives eventually figure out how to move forward. In real life, of course, there is no guarantee that any particular dispute will be resolved before the curtain falls. There is certainly no guarantee that personal affronts spewed forth to elicit laughs will be accepted with equanimity. Actual human beings get angry when subjected to put-downs. Nor is there any certainty that over-the top manipulations will be endured as endearing eccentricities. Flesh and blood spouses, whose integrity is disrespected, often threaten divorce. Rather than allow themselves to be “used,” they opt out of the relationship.

In the modern nuclear family, relative isolation places the burden for settling personal differences squarely on the spouses. There is no grizzled patriarch perched just outside ready to come in and impose an agreement. There is no referee to prevent the two from playing dirty tricks on one another. When, in contrast, Nazi Germany’s Joseph Goebbels alienated his wife by engaging in an extra-marital liaison, Adolf Hitler stepped in. The Fuehrer ordered his propaganda minister to return home and behave himself. Hitler would not allow a scandal to disrupt his regime and he had the clout to make his
will felt. For most contemporary couples, there is no comparable authority, nor would it always be a good idea if there were. As a result, if they do not know how to work through their differences, the odds are these will not be worked through. If they cannot refrain from gratuitous insults, the chances are these will be commonplace. Moreover, as both parties know, if their conflicts grow too heated, there is always the safety valve of a break up. With fewer overt penalties for divorce, they may decide that a separation is easier than achieving an agreement.

After it began to become common, divorce was often regarded with as much equanimity as changing an article of clothing. If a particular spouse was unsuitable, he or she could be taken off and exchanged for a better fitting model. People did not realize that emotional attachments are not fungible. One cannot be substituted for another without repercussions. The bonding accomplished by the courtship process really does rearrange internal priorities. This means that tearing a relationship apart is experienced as enormously painful, even when the offending spouse is a villain. Divorce is almost always experienced as a failure. It is neither planned, nor welcomed. In the end, it may result in a better relationship, but then again it might not. What is needed is not a cavalier attitude toward marriage, but a dedication to making it succeed. Regarding marriage as about a piece of paper that can be foregone without negative consequences is usually a prelude to disaster (or at least a broken heart). It betokens an unwillingness to make the effort required to reconcile the inevitable disparities that divide any couple.

Despite romantic flights of fancy, “soul mates” are never so congruent that they agree on everything. Even people who are in love are different from one another. They invariably have diverse priorities and inconsistent reactions. Just in terms of gender, they
will differ. Men and women are not the same, and if they do not understand this—if they do not tolerate their respective idiosyncrasies—they are in for a rough ride. Research confirms that women tend to talk more than men; hence a husband who cannot make allowances for this garrulousness is apt to provoke superfluous quarrels. Likewise, men tend to be less emotionally sensitive than women; hence the wife who takes this as a personal slight is liable to feel aggrieved for what cannot be avoided. The genders also differ on multi-tasking, three-dimensional thinking, and on average aggressiveness. But not every marital dispute can be traced to biology. Having grown up in different circumstances, and been subjected to different social pressures, what works for one partner may not for another. Women, for instance, are taught that their appearance matters a great deal. Men are not so heavily indoctrinated. As a consequence, women take more time preparing for social occasions than do men. Even a country song by Brad Paisley cautions men that they may need to “wait on a woman.”

Even silly little things can spark squabbles. When I was much younger, I had a fight with my live-in girlfriend about how to use aluminum foil. She was preparing the evening meal and I was hovering over her shoulder making helpful suggestions. One of these concerned how she was wrapping a food item. I noted that she was “doing it wrong.” As I explained, that was not how my mother did it. Somehow, she did not take this observation in the spirit in which it was intended. She became openly peaked and demanded that I butt out. Nowadays, when I use this example in my classes, everyone, especially the women, laughs. They immediately identify with my girlfriend and understand why she was offended.
My mistake, in addition to comparing my roommate with my mother, was trampling on her prerogatives. She was preparing the meal. At that moment it was her kitchen, not mine. Unbeknownst to me, I had violated our informal division of labor. There were some activities over which she took precedence and some over which I had primary control. Although we had not discussed who would be in charge of what, we had nevertheless apportioned a variety of tasks between us. The same sort of thing would nowadays happen if I made helpful suggestions when my wife is pruning the plants or if she interfered with me when I am preparing egg foo young (a favorite of mine).

Not just the larger society, but intimate relationships are characterized by a partition in role specialties. One partner will do most of the shopping and therefore be accorded greater influence in compiling the shopping list, whereas the other will be the fixit person and thus allowed the final word in scheduling repair projects. In former years, the nature of this division followed traditional guidelines. That the woman did the cooking and the man was the breadwinner was a hallowed convention violated at one’s peril. Today, of course, this division of labor is under assault. Just as the sorts of jobs undertaken in the occupational arena have been mutating, so have those confined to more intimate venues. Today it is up to a couple to work out their private division of labor. Within the precincts of their secluded domain, they determine who will do what.

All of this is by way of emphasizing that perhaps the single most significant skill needed to fashion a successful relationship is an ability to engage in equitable negotiations. A middle-class marriage cannot be like a boxing match. It cannot be the case that spouses slug things out, either physically or emotionally, with one emerging as the victor and the other the loser. Unless both participate in fair-minded bargaining
sessions from which each derives a satisfactory resolution, the stage will be set for escalating conflicts. Professionalized individuals, with the expertise and inclination to be self-directed, are unlikely to accept submergence in a servile relationship. Otherwise capable of competent, decentralized decision-making, they are unlikely to settle for imposed solutions, even from a much-loved partner. Each party to an intimate association will want to be heard and have influence over shared decisions. Each will also want his or her personal needs respected and fulfilled. To this end, both have to be expert at the mechanics of intimate negotiations, as well as being strongly motivated to make them work.

Some years ago, a colleague and I had a discussion about which was more important to marital success: negotiation skills or a firm commitment to the relationship. In fact, these are closely connected. A commitment to a relationship is nothing if it is not a commitment to negotiating fairly. If a couple is to live together in relative harmony, they must begin by agreeing that they are morally equal. Just as they seek social equality, so must they enforce moral parity. During the courtship phase the parties will have evaluated their relative assets. During intimate negotiations they must now seek equivalent outcomes. Unless they agree that the needs of one are just as important as the needs of the other, one, or both, will feel cheated. The central purpose in committing to a lifelong alliance is to collaborate for the benefit of both. Unless this obligation is understood, and strongly internalized, the grievances of one, or both, are bound to accumulate. Instead of the reciprocity expected from friends, there occurs what marital counselors call “gunny-sacking.” Each party stores up instances of injustice and brings
them out at a later date to employ as weapons. In due course, the claims and counter-claims become so lacerating that the wounds never heal.

But moral parity is merely the beginning. Competent negotiators must also be competent problem solvers. Intimate partners who seek the best for themselves and their mates must be able to figure out what meets their respective needs. This often entails compromise, but creative solutions can maximize their joint rewards. The whole, if it is ingeniously constructed, can, in fact, be greater than the sum of the parts. Rather than a zero-sum game, in which the success of one implies the failure of the other, they can develop strategies from which both come out ahead. They can, for instance, apply their skills as role-takers. If each places him or herself imaginatively in the shoes of the other, both can more effectively determine what might meet each other’s needs. Instead of relying exclusively on the other’s resourcefulness, both parties thereby add their inventive aptitudes to the problem-solving process. In a sense, this is simply an instance of two minds being better than one. In another, it is a case of each person stimulating the creative impulses of the other. As with the sort of brainstorming that occurs in artistic occupations, the two informally inspire each other’s best efforts—that is, as long as they truly care about each other.

Almost a century ago, as the hazards of voluntary intimacy were beginning to garner attention, there was a simultaneous rebellion against committed relationships. During the 1920s, free love gained widespread currency among the cognoscenti. The traditional marriage was equated with bondage; hence liberation from it was associated with recreational promiscuity. Both men and women were encouraged to make love with whomever they wanted, whenever they wanted. More recently the call has been for the
multicultural family. According to the relativists, no one form of interpersonal relationship is superior to any other. Single parent households, wife swapping, and “shacking up” are regarded as equivalent, with each equally capable of meeting human needs. These activists regularly urge us to: “Do our own thing!” They tell us to do whatever feels good—and that everything will work out in the end. They also tell us that we need not worry about honoring interpersonal commitments because we should be capable of extending love to every human being. With this kind of philosophy, cohabiting before marriage, engaging in infidelities while married, and juggling multiple families after being married are all deemed valid, that is, as long as the parties consider them so.

Most people who have been involved in actual relationships recognize that these recommendations are self-defeating. Relationships that are treated as fungible are likely to be regarded as implying betrayal. A partner who guiltlessly looks elsewhere for interpersonal solace is rightly regarded as untrustworthy. Intimacy is not only about being close, but about being pledged to remain close. Social scientists know that swinging couples tend to become non-couples and that non-committed relationships tend to be emotionally shallow. This being so, it remains to be explained why so many intelligent people have believed that committed relationships are tantamount to being sent to jail. Why have they concluded that they will be happier if they do not promise to be faithful to a single significant other? The answer is apparently tied to the Middle Class Revolution.

In a professionalizing techno-commercial world, with self-direction becoming more extensive, being in a committed relationship may appear to contradict the need for
personal freedom. Modern comedians routinely make jokes about losing one’s liberty after getting married. Suddenly a previously unfettered human being must report every movement to a spouse. This freshly minted \textit{other half} will want to know when a spouse will get home, what this other wants to eat for dinner, and when the two will next visit the in-laws. Back in the good old days, before a newlywed had a ball and chain, it was possible to eat pizza for breakfast, keep a keg of beer in the closet, or take off for a Caribbean vacation on the spur of the moment. Worse still are the restrictions imposed by having children. These youngsters cannot be left home alone so that their parents are able to attend an all night party. Nor can parents impulsively quit working, that is, if they are to continue providing their voracious offspring with food. No. Married couples with children cannot have it all. Some of what they would like must be ceded to needy others who cannot fend for themselves.

The contradiction in all this is between being an autonomous decision maker and a tightly limited one. It might seem that self-directed individuals should only have to consult themselves before making up their minds. Part of being an independent agent theoretically means not having to conform to external pressures, at least not automatically. Yet, there is no question that marriage reduces a person’s spontaneity. There is also no question that it forecloses certain options. One suddenly has to take account of the desires of other persons. Where then is the ability to be one’s own person? For those who have not had much experience in self-direction, being a self-reliant decision maker may seem to imply total independence. In reality it does not, and never has. Independent decision-makers have always needed to take account the needs and desires of others.
As John Donne wrote long ago; No man is an island. The confusion seems to have arisen as battalions of formerly working class individuals engaged in social mobility. In moving up, they have had to tear themselves free from conformist roots. But in order to achieve this, they have frequently been required to go to extremes. Rather than remain obedient to the demands of their childhoods, they have had to insist on being obedient to no one. This absolute freedom—this impossible freedom—became their conception of genuine freedom. They believed this was their due as they became social leaders. Thus, on the job, they expected to be the total boss. They were supposed to give orders and never again receive them. By the same token, they were no longer to endure orders at home. Their parents must not boss them around, and neither should a spouse. Even negotiations, in which they were pressured to make concessions, seemed to infringe on their sacred prerogatives. Why should they be forced to give up what they wanted, when if they opted out of marriage, they could have it all?

Intimate relationships, however, are about interdependence. They require the parties to give up some of their autonomy. Nevertheless, there is, or should be, ample compensation. An intimate relationship is supposed to be a dependable alliance. It is intended to be an association to which spouses can turn to each other for reliable emotional support. Marriage, to be sure, cannot supply all of a person’s needs. No human being can possibly possess all of the qualities necessary for this to occur. Still, a good marriage ought meet important needs. A husband and wife should be able to help each other achieve what they separately, and collectively, desire. The point of an enduring alliance is to enhance the strength of both parties. Doing so, however, requires meshing their individual strengths so as to make them complementary. This means
adjusting them to one another, which in turn necessitates, not spontaneity, but mutual sensitivity and restraint.

Marital partners cannot do whatever they want whenever they want. To the contrary, they must emphasize what works in tandem. In negotiating with one another, they, therefore, need to relinquish some of what they desire. In doing so, it is also true that they relinquish some of their freedoms. The paradox in this is that they also gain some. By collaborating together, the two can do things that neither would be able to manage independently. Their range of options is thus both smaller, and greater, than it would have been had they remained independent. In other words, they can remain self-directed as long as they voluntarily decide to cooperate for their mutual benefit. What they choose may be modified by the nature of their relationship, but they are still free to make personal choices. In becoming a couple, they will be transformed into different people than they would have been had they stayed single, nonetheless both remain capable of self-directed decision-making.

Orgone

Emotional attachments are at the core of marriage, but something more must be said about sex. A good place to begin is with Wilhelm Reich. He was one of Sigmund Freud’s most notorious disciples. Freud himself was infamous in some circles for having exalted sexuality as the most crucial of all human motivators. But Reich took Freud’s theory a giant step further. He converted Freud’s libido hypothesis into an orgone theory. Orgone was supposed to be the substance that gave human beings their personal vitality. Literally postulated to pervade the universe—much in the manner of “the force” in the Star Wars movies—it could be concentrated by various mechanical devices. Reich built
one of these and called it an orgone box. Looking somewhat like a telephone booth, when a patient sat in it, orgone would presumably be drawn from the atmosphere to enhance his sexual potency. This, asserted Reich, was the secret of personal happiness. It was the cure-all for psychic ills. What was more, for a modest price, he was prepared to allow it to improve the life of all comers.

Reich was eventually convicted for being a quack, but this fate did not befall Alfred Kinsey. His books about human sexuality caused a stir, but he died before anyone could take him to court. Kinsey, not unlike Reich, believed that sexuality was a cure-all. A careful reading of his monographs indicates that his criterion for sexual adequacy is the number of orgasms of which a person is capable. The more often an individual is able to reach sexual climax, the better adjusted he or she supposedly is. Nor did it matter if these orgasms were achieved in the traditional manner. Kinsey was not a big fan of the missionary position. For him, an orgasm was an orgasm. This placed heterosexual lovemaking, homosexual lovemaking, and the paraphilias on a par. In Kinsey’s universe, there were no sexual perversions. If a particular form of sexual release worked for a person, then it worked and should not be subjected to social opprobrium. Masturbation was okay, pedophilia was okay, and presumably even sadomasochism was okay. Physical sex was the Holy Grail. Yet, for Kinsey, love was virtually invisible. It never came up in his studies. Nor did he seriously consider the possibility that some sexual practices might interfere with loving relationships. Given his personal difficulties with heterosexual intimacy, he probably thought it a myth.

If we fast-forward to more recent years, we encounter the phenomenon of sexualized programming. Cable television, and in the fullness of time, commercial
television, has become obsessed with sexuality a la the Kinsey paradigm. A host of programs are critically celebrated for their candor in separating sex from love. In the widely admired *Sex in the City*, the ostensible objective was to find the perfect bedmate, not the perfect intimate partner. Its heroines’ operative theory seemed to be that good sex equaled a good relationship. If another person could give you an earthshaking orgasm, that was all a genuinely enlightened person could expect. At the end of the series, to be sure, the protagonists did seek love, but that was after years of libidinous titillation.

Locker room talk, even among women, became the epitome of sophisticated courtship. Not for them the tedious business of biography swapping, trust testing, or role negotiations.

Sex, it must be stressed, is not the same as love. Sex can enhance love, and vice versa, but the two are not interchangeable. Sex on its own, independent of love, tends to be hollow. It is about body parts causing pleasurable friction and little more. During the 1960s, at the height of the hippie eruption, it was widely believed that sex was all a person required. The Beatles may have sung about “love being all you really need,” but on the street this translated into crash pads and drug-assisted orgies. The hippies are older now, and for some their youth is a slightly embarrassing memory, but their faith in the potency of sex continues with us. Many still assume that carnal arousal is the greatest delight to which a person can aspire. Nevertheless, sex for its own sake is a false promise. Bona fide sex addicts tend to be unhappy. They go through the motions with a myriad of partners, but are normally more terrified than satisfied. For them, sex is a compulsion; something they must perform in order to ward off personal demons. Moreover, because whom they perform the act with does not count, they can scarcely
experience the emotional warmth of physical closeness. The basketball star Walt Chamberlain boasted of having bedded down with over twenty thousand women during his lifetime. After he died, and the television cameras came to survey his home, all the world became privy to his penchant for brothel inspired interior decoration. Despite this, how, a viewer might wonder, could he have managed to transport so many ladies in and out of his bedroom? Did he have an assembly line? In the final analysis, his boast was more about setting endurance records than finding personal contentment. So, sad to say, are the sexual proclivities of contemporary entertainments. They too derive more from social insecurities than a genuine search for the good life.

A personal professionalism, when it comes to interpersonal relationships, must begin by distinguishing sex from love. Because a fixation on raw sexuality usually precludes achieving a lasting attachment, competent decision makers must understand what they are choosing. They have to be experts on the actual dimensions of sexual activities and intimate bonding. Moreover, they must be internally motivated to seek the latter, whatever the temptations of the former. Fortunately, marriage is not going out of style. Intimacy, even when it is voluntary, has enormous payoffs. Despite all of the encomiums to sex for its own sake, the current ubiquity of sexual innuendo and blatant sensuality are a smoke screen. While they are capable of attracting the attention of creatures evolved to be attracted by sexual signals, they cannot replace loving relationships. Sex is entertaining. It is fun. But in the long run a diet of pure sex, and only sex, is not especially nourishing. Professionalized selves must recognize this. If they do not, they cannot be experts in organizing their private lives. If the do not, they are unlikely to be motivated to make the efforts needed to achieve genuine love.
Nowadays, with sexualized language all the rage, the real dirty word is not the F-word, but the P-word. Many people are more afraid of being labeled a “prude” than a libertine. To believe too strongly in sexual fidelity has become associated with sexual inexperience. Worse than being old-fashioned, virginity has come to connote naïveté. Many high school girls even apologize for their chastity. It is presumed to be a sign either of being physically unattractive or so emotionally immature as to be terrified of sex. Nevertheless, interpersonal loyalty, which is to say, old-fashioned love, is essential to interpersonal trust. Married couples should not have to fret about a philandering spouse. They should have sufficient confidence in each other’s commitments to know their partner will not wander. Voluntary intimacy, if it is to be maintained, depends upon both parties exercising personal discipline. Despite the sexual temptations, which thanks to a growing acceptance of co-ed activities are multiplying, each spouse must have sufficient self-control not to act. Former president Jimmy Carter famously admitted to lusting in his heart, but that is as far as it should go. To some, this may sound overly restrictive. They will argue that many people are comfortable sharing a loved-one’s body with third parties. This is probably so, but it is the exception. It is not the sort of counsel that can become the norm. For most people, cultivating sexual fidelity is a better bet. It is more apt to result in dependable interpersonal devotion.

Years ago, the historian Christopher Lasch introduced the notion that marriage could function as a haven in a heartless world. Well acquainted with the impersonal demands of modernity, he understood that most people needed a personalized sanctuary into which to retreat. After a long day of making decisions in an environment of uncertainty, they longed for the security of a personal relationship with someone who
would understand their plight. For most people being understood is not a luxury. It is a
necessity. For them, the alternative is isolation. To be forever alone, even if one is
otherwise powerful, is to be consigned to a private hell. It is to be left by oneself unable
to savor what one has achieved. The antidote to this loneliness is not sex, but love. Love
connects individuals where they live, whereas sex only connects their physiological
plumbing. In a middle-class world, the intimate connections furnished by love become
more, not less, important. The difficulties and uncertainties of such associations
notwithstanding, professionalized selves find it incumbent upon themselves to be more
knowledgeable about love. Interpersonal bonding cannot be left to romantic chance; nor
ceded to the myth of all-curative sex. It too must be something at which modern human
beings become personally competent.

Furthermore, love enhances sex. Sex and love may differ, with love ultimately
the more valuable of the two, but sex is not inconsequential. Nor is it totally divorced
from love. Years ago, in part thanks to Kinsey, when the mechanics of sex attracted
scientific attention, one of the consequences was flurry of interest in sex therapy. It was
assumed that couples suffering from sexual dysfunctions could be helped by instructing
them in the physiology of coitus. For many suffering from impotence or orgasm
difficulties this was a blessing. For many others, however, it was disappointing. In time,
it became clear that they were failing to achieve climax, not because they did not
understand the technicalities of sex or because they suffered from a medical condition,
but because they did not like their partner. It turns out that it is difficult to get excited
about having sexual intercourse with someone one dislikes. Simply looking into the eyes
of someone one hates is a turn-off. But more than this, looking into the eyes of a person
one loves, is a turn on. To see the excitement and pleasure on the face of a partner one cares about is exciting. It is pleasurable to give pleasure to a loved other. This is why successful intimacy has the additional benefit of promoting sexual satisfaction.

**Friendship**

One small addendum must be inserted here. We human beings do not live by intimacy alone. Most of us require supplementary relationships. Because no two people, however close, can supply all of each other’s needs, couples benefit from outside connections. These others lift the burden of exclusivity and allow the partners breathing room. In short, even loving spouses require friends. They profit from associations with others who are fond of them, that is, who are not merely allies in the quest for social mobility. Those who do not have other human beings with whom they find pleasurable collaboration are liable to feel lonely. Having no one with whom to share their pleasures, they find them less pleasurable.

Mercifully, most of us do make friends. We find compatible others with whom to share a variety of activities. Moreover, just as there are processes for creating attachments to potential intimates, there are mechanisms for creating attachments to what are usually same-sex associates. These bonds are generally not as intense as those consummated in sex, but they are not insubstantial. Indeed, many people care so much about the welfare of their friends that they will risk their lives to protect them. They may care so much that they will literally reshape their lives so as to put themselves in close proximity with their buddies.

Friendship has always been part of the human condition. What has changed with the advent of the Middle Class Revolution is where people seek friendship. Living as
most now do in suburban enclaves, many commentators bemoan the isolation of stand-alone homes and automobile-centered lifestyles. Modern suburbanites are presumed to be sitting alone in their separate abodes, probably watching television, but otherwise bored out of their skulls. Suburbanism is portrayed as equivalent to empty-headed conformity. It is described as a living death that can be cured by returning to an urban setting alive with street life and multicultural excitement. There, in the city, people are close enough to get to interact with each other on a daily basis. There they can care about each other and not merely the crabgrass on their front lawns. This, at any rate, is what many urban planners say. Once more, however, the conventional wisdom is wrong. Suburbanites are not friendless clones. They are not pining away in a desperate isolation imposed on them by becoming middle class.

What the experts fail to appreciate is the evolution of a new sort of community. Once community meant living side by side. People got to know each other and collaborate on joint activities because they resided on the same street. In a world where transportation was confined to foot traffic, it was one’s immediate neighbors with whom one shared close contacts. Yet, times have changed. Ours has become an automobile age. Attached to the isolated suburban houses so universally maligned are garages in which automobiles and SUVs are on call to whisk their owners to locations many tens of miles away. The much-despised network of roadways that terminate at their front doors provide access to a myriad of persons and possibilities. As a result, suburbanites get to choose their friends. They are not limited to persons within walking distance. This allows them to interact with the individuals with whom they have the most in common. As decentralized decision makers, they make decisions about with whom to associate.
Today most people reside in neighborhoods of association rather than neighborhoods of propinquity. They continue to have viable sets of acquaintances, but these are more spread out than in the past. This makes them less visible to outsiders, but it does not mean they are non-existent. If anything, a greater range of choices allows people to tailor their activities to their personal needs. The catch is that once more professionalized selves must obtain a competence at making choices. As with love, they have to understand what their new environments demand. They must both perceive them for what it are and be internally motivated to take advantage of their possibilities. If they can, they need not be alone.
Chapter 8

Parenting

Leaving Scars

The Gold Star Mother methadone clinic stood on Canal Street, just blocks away from the entrance to the Holland Tunnel. The treatment center was run by the City of New York and served hundreds of heroin addicts struggling to control their craving. My job was that of counselor. Several dozens of our clients were assigned to my care. They were required to consult with me at regular intervals to try to excise their personal demons. If all went well, they would come to understand why they had become addicted and, in the process, lose their compulsion to shoot up a substance they knew to be deadly.

Contrary to what many laypersons believe, most drug addicts are not stupid. They are sufficiently intelligent to recognize the consequences of their actions. But they are trapped in them nevertheless. The function of the methadone counselor was to assist them in escaping their nemesis. Under the best of circumstances, it is even possible for them to live normal lives; lives without the benefit of the physiological safety net provided by methadone.

One of my clients was a fellow I shall call John. John was about thirty years old and had been addicted since his teens. He was sturdily built and something over six feet tall. What made John memorable was his visage. This could only be described as fierce—very fierce. John’s eyes were piercing and filled with fury. Whenever he looked at you, he seemed on the verge of unleashing a physical assault. Adding to the unease this produced was the goatee that embellished his face. It literally made him look demonic. He likewise acted as if he were possessed by a devil. Not once did I see John
crack a smile. Never did I see his brow free of a scowl. But what was most unsettling
was John’s bearing. A truly frightening dimension of his repertoire appeared if one
approached him from the rear. John was always on edge. Hyper-vigilant, he was
eternally ready to go on the attack. Each day he came to the clinic, John carried a stout
eight-foot long staff normally utilized as a walking stick. Its true function, however, was
as a weapon. This became clear if you made the mistake of coming up to him by
surprise. Those who did so found him abruptly whirling around, the rod now clutched in
both hands, ready to deliver a lethal blow. The effect of this, combined with his
ferocious demeanor, was disconcerting. He looked as if he were about to kill, and, what
was worse, that he could.

But John was my client. He might tower over me and seek to intimidate me, but
it was my job to help him. And I tried. After several months, we actually developed a
constructive relationship. The longer we talked, the more John trusted me. He even
began to share his secrets. Our collaboration, I flattered myself to believe, was becoming
a therapeutic alliance. We seemed to be making progress toward dealing with his central
issues. Not only was John more comfortable in my presence, and I in his, but he was
increasingly candid. Then one day he became more serious than usual. After adjourning
to my office, he sat down in the client’s chair with his legs apart and his head drooped
down almost as if he were trying to quell a queasy stomach. Nevertheless, John was not
feeling physically ill. It was his emotional condition that was fragile. Slowly, and
haltingly, he informed me that he had something important to say. This was going to be
difficult, but he needed to share it with someone; he had to get it off his chest.
To begin with, John explained that he had a girlfriend. The two had been living together for several months. Now things were getting serious. They were talking about getting married. More than this, they were talking about having a baby. Actually, they had recently discovered she was pregnant. John paused, then elaborated by disclosing how he had never previously considered becoming a father. In the past, he insisted upon an abortion. Now he was thinking about establishing a normal life. It might, he mused, be nice to have a wife and a child. But he wanted to be a good father. He wanted to be able to support his son or daughter and provide it with the paternal support he never received from his own father. As I had learned from previous discussions, John’s father was a man with a colossal temper. The two had always fought while John was growing up. Indeed, John left his parent’s house while still a teenager, lest their conflicts become deadly. Now John wanted to make peace with his father. He concluded that unless he did, he could not effectively relate with a child. The plan was to go down to Florida where his parents were now residing so as to have a long overdue heart-to-heart talk with his Dad. The idea was to bury the hatchet so that John would no longer feel angry at his father, or be tempted to displace this anger on an innocent baby.

John did go down to Florida. He was supposed to be gone for two weeks, but returned after one. Almost immediately upon getting off the bus he came to see me. Agitated to the point where he could barely sit down, he ambivalence kept him oscillating between talking to me and bolting out the door. Clearly John needed to tell me about the monumental brawl he had had with his father. The two evidently fought for days on end. Instead of his father listening to his son and seeking common ground, all of their old issues had arisen once again. John, in sputtering out the pain of this failure, fluctuated
between frustration at not having gotten through and massive anger at having been rebuffed. Deeply saddened by not having resolved unfinished business, he was alarmed by his desire to get even. In listening to his anguish, my goal was to assist John in regaining control. I sought to reduce his anxiety and return his anger to manageable levels. While John wanted the same thing, his emotions were so intense that he could not stand having them elicited. All he wanted to do was leave; to, as it were, jump out of his skin so that he would not have to feel so unhappy.

Each time John indicated a desire to depart, I urged him to stay so that we could deal with his feelings. He knew this needed to be done, but he was not sure it was possible. Eventually he informed me that he had to go. He simply would not stay. Perceiving that I could not stop him, I extracted a solemn promise. John was to return the next day so that we could continue our discussion. Though reluctant to commit himself, John at length agreed. He would return. He would come to see me early the next afternoon. But John did not return. He did not come the next day, or the day after that. Since he did not have a phone, I could not contact him. Compelled to wait on tenterhooks, I feared the worst, but hoped for the best. Finally, by the third day, a colleague approached me as I sat at my desk. He had a newspaper clipping in hand. As I read from it, it immediately became apparent that it was about John. It seemed that he had returned home after unburdening himself, had gone into the closet of the apartment she shared with his girlfriend, retrieved the shotgun he kept there, used it to shoot her head off, then turned to weapon around and shot off his own head. John, his girlfriend, and their unborn child, were all dead. They had died instantly. John’s pain had been so
great that the only resolution he could imagine was instantaneous oblivion for himself and those he cared about.

John’s case is extreme. He had been the victim of coercive parenting. He knew that his father had not provided the supportive parenting he needed. He also feared that he would not be able to provide this for his own child. The ultimate effect was devastating. It had been fatal. Nevertheless, inadequate parenting is fairly common. Many mothers and fathers inflict emotional scars in the process of raising their young. They may not intentionally cause pain; nor do they usually inflict agony as severe as that experienced by John, but the distress they instill is sufficient to interfere with middle class success. In John’s case, he had been so brutalized that he could not control his feelings. He had, in essence, been tortured to such a degree that he could not engage in competent decision-making. Not only could he not hold a permanent job, or sustain a long-term relationship, he could not do what was necessary to be the sort of parent he wanted to become. Others are less damaged, but they too may find their professionalization thwarted.

While working at the methadone clinic I was privy to many instances of the effects of defective parenting. Time and again I saw clients fail because they could not escape the consequences of what their parents had done. Kevin (that is what I dubbed him in a previous book) was younger than John. He was barely twenty when I first encountered him. Also a heroin addict, he could not give up his chemical dependency despite taking methadone. Routinely overdosing on street drugs, many an afternoon he would stagger to the clinic while it was still located on the ferryboat for which it was named. There he would fall down on the gangplank and promptly regurgitate his last
meal over himself and the pathway. The clinic doctors would then, in disgust, call for an ambulance to take him to a local hospital where he could undergo in-patient detoxification. But after he was clean and sober, Kevin invariably returned to his old habits. Eventually he took to challenging the drug pushers in his home neighborhood. They, in turn, retaliated by punching him in the jaw, and on two occasions breaking it. It was these self-generated assaults that stimulated me to make Kevin a special project. I needed to understand what caused him to hate himself so much that he placed himself in such jeopardy.

Unlike John, Kevin did not grow up with a brutal father. He was not physically attacked or berated by either of his parents. No, Kevin was not physiologically coerced; he was neglected. Kevin’s mother was a white prostitute and his father a black street hustler. Neither, however, wanted anything to do with their child. His mother abandoned him when he was months old. His father remained in the picture for several years, but in the end abandoned him too. Ultimately an uncle, his father’s brother, raised Kevin. Yet this was mostly parenting by inattention. Kevin became a street kid, taking care of his own needs as best he could. Since he was of mixed race, and looked as much, his problems were compounded by social rejection. Neither the members of the black community where he lived, nor the white community downtown, accepted him as one of their own. Utterly bereft of human companionship, he came to hate himself with an intensity parallel that directed at him from the outside. If John’s parenting left him filled with an uncontrollable rage, Kevin’s left him dangerously empty. Unable to hold on to the protective concern of loving adults, he was on the verge of letting go of everything to
allow fate to do its worst. Is the end, this is what happened when another drug dealer ended Kevin’s misery by stabbing him in the chest.

The Gold Star Mother methadone clinic was a veritable festival of incompetent parenting. Not only were most of the clients handicapped in their quest for social success, but many passed the misery their families of origin on to another generation. Themselves frustrated by an inability to engage in skillful self-direction, as parents, they perpetuated this incapacity by raising their children as ineffectually as they had been raised. Nonetheless, it was not unusual for the mothers to insist upon their everlasting devotion to their children. They would tell me how important these youngsters were and how determined they were, as mothers, to lavish attention upon them. Then when, as frequently happened, these children were taken from them on charges of child abuse, these same women would come to me with tears in the eyes. Copiously crying about the injustice of governmental agencies, they pleaded for my intervention in seeking the return of their offspring. More than once, I was exposed to heart-rending narratives about how their children were the centers of their universe. I was told that they could not live without them and that the youngsters could not survive without maternal care. Didn’t I understand that a mother’s love was one of the strongest forces in nature? Didn’t I realize that this was a life or death situation, and that if I did not rescue the victims of this crime, their lives would be as good as over?

On several occasions I did intervene. I provided testimonials that in a number of instances persuaded the authorities to return the children to their mothers. But on each of these occasions, I was disappointed. When these women came into the clinic with their children in tow, I did not see the maternal solicitude of which they bragged. Time and
again they acted as if their offspring were not there. Deeply engrossed in conversation with other clients, they acted as if their young were bothersome nuisances. Sometimes they even pretended not to hear tiny pleas for recognition. Frequently they gave of these youngsters the casual back of a hand. In the worst cases, the very women who assured me of their undying love physically abused their children. On several occasions I detected the scars left by their handiwork. There on the arms of toddlers were the unmistakable burn marks left by crushing out a cigarette. This was more than I could bear and I tied to put a stop to it. But when I confronted the mothers to blame, the typical response was self-righteous denial. What was I talking about? They had done no such thing. Their children were perfectly okay. How could I even consider the possibility that they, as mothers, might need to acquire better parenting skills? They loved their children. Their unambiguous message was that I should butt out.

The worst case I encountered involved the death of an infant. I did not literally see what essentially constituted murder, but I knew all the parties first hand. The woman, who was the client of another counselor, was living, not with the father of her child, but with a boyfriend. One day, while in their shared apartment, this stepfather became incensed by the infant’s cries. So angry was he at his girlfriend’s inability to silence the child that he grabbed it from her arms and threw it against the wall. Later medical interventions were unable to revive the infant. Nevertheless neither of these adults expressed genuine remorse over the incident. Both cried crocodile tears, but in the end blamed others for failing to provide them sufficient help. Bad parenting typically refuses to perceive itself as bad parenting.
Admittedly, these examples are not the norm. They are more violent and the end products more dire. The reason for presenting them is not to imply that most parents are inept. Few are as heavy-handed. Nonetheless good parenting does not come naturally. Simply giving life to a child does not ensure that mothers or fathers automatically know how to raise them to a competent, self-directed adulthood. Not only may they not know how to impart middle class skills, they may instill the opposite. Coercive and/or neglectful parents frequently inspire attitudes inimical to future success. In the worst instances, they can arouse so much pain as to make life unbearable. Often parents who consciously want their children to do well, for reasons they do not understand, make this nearly impossible. Such was the dilemma of one of my clients at a psychiatric hospital.

Henry (not his real name) suffered from catatonic schizophrenia. He was in the throes of a mental condition that is primarily biological. Even so, his situation was made worse by the conduct of his family of origin. Most psychiatrists believe that though genetically based, schizophrenic symptoms are exacerbated by interpersonal stress. This is what happened to Henry. While a teenager, and ostensibly normal, he endured a rude emotional shock. Henry’s father was a Protestant minister. A strict taskmaster, this gentleman demanded perfect comportment from his son. Henry attempted to comply. He instituted heroic efforts at principled conduct. Moreover, in this he succeeded. Most people regarded him as the very model of what a pastor’s child should be. Excruciatingly moral, Henry always tried to do the right thing. Then, without warning, came a devastating betrayal. His father, with whose standards Henry was attempting to comply, suddenly flouted his own rules. This man unexpectedly filed for divorce. Having touted the sanctity of marriage, he was going to leave Henry’s mother, and his ministry, in order
to wed a much younger woman. In this, he expressed no guilt. He simply decided to satisfy his personal needs. Henry was shocked. The rock upon which he depended for emotional stability had lost its moorings. Nor did Henry’s mother help. In her sorrow and confusion, she resorted to the martyr role. Rather than provide her son with support, she turned to him to validate her victim status. He was to protect her, and perhaps salvage her marriage.

This was too much for Henry. Himself congenitally fragile, he could not meet these demands. As much as he wished to, he could not find a way to justify his father’s egoistic behavior or satisfy his mother’s selfish demands. He could not rescue their marriage or protect himself from the emotional storms that threatened to swamp his brittle psyche. This said, Henry’s parents were neither abusive nor neglectful. Neither of them intentionally sought to make their son’s life more difficult. Neither consciously realized that they were overwhelming his ability to cope. They were simply human beings who were themselves overwhelmed by forces beyond their control. Poor parenting does not have to be abusive parenting. It may result from the human weaknesses that can befall any of us. Parents who do not do what their children need are sometimes the victims of their own ignorance or personal shortcomings. They may try their best, but because they are defending themselves from perceived threats, they neither identify, nor implement, what should be done. Themselves having difficulty becoming winners, they find it impossible to prepare their youngsters to become winners.

**Doing What Comes Naturally**

Good parenting is a skill. Indeed, it is a difficult skill to master. As our society becomes more professionalized, the techniques needed to prepare children for a middle
class existence can remain elusive. Parents who wish to assist their children in achieving success often find that they do not possess the expertise to do so. Either they emulate the way their parents raised them or they fly by the seat of their pants. Hoping against hope that good parenting is a natural instinct, they never realize that the rules of the game have changed. They assume that the world into which they were born represents the normal human condition. Although they may personally encounter demands to become decentralized decision-makers, they do not extrapolate these to their childrearing practices. Instead of grooming their offspring to be self-directed, they perpetuate the conformity-centered rituals to which they were exposed. Themselves the victims of a cultural lag, their insecurities reinforce an attachment to customs that are no longer tenable. Far from understanding that they need to adopt new methods of childrearing, when things go wrong this only serves to strengthen an outmoded resolve.

This is what happened to my father. He was raised to be a dutiful son; hence he expected his son to be as dutiful. Although he ultimately became an electronic engineer, a job that required him to exercise considerable initiative, initiative is not what he desired of his children. His idea of a good child was one who did as he was told. A parent’s responsibility was to give orders that were instantly obeyed. No questions were to be asked; no qualms were to be expressed. Nor was it a parent’s task to provide detailed instructions. Still less was it his duty to supply emotional support. As a father, all that was required was to place a saw in his son’s hand and command that he perform. It was then up to the boy to cut the two-by-four in half. If the child bungled this task, it was the child’s fault. The youngster needed to be upbraided; not provided with an excuse. To let him off the hook was to spoil the child. He might subsequently grow up to be a lazy
shirker who never accepted responsibility. The parent who was soft, who refused to issue coercive demands, thus allowed his child to become soft. He was turning him into a wimp who would never be able to handle the adversities of adult life. At the very least, it was up to the good parent to demand that a child who figuratively fell off a horse get back on until he was able to ride without assistance.

How radically times have changed was brought home to me when I observed my brother teaching his teenage daughter how to drive. Our father had been an incredibly impatient teacher who taught none of his children how to handle an automobile. With me, he entirely refused to provide lessons, but with my sister Carol, because she was a girl, he was persuaded to try. This was still the era of the stick shift, therefore their first session concerned how to utilize the clutch. Naturally, as a teenager, Carol was nervous. Suddenly behind the wheel of a full sized automobile, on a real city street, with an anxious and already angry father sitting beside her, she struggled to remain calm. Dad, his misgivings visible in his clenched teeth and piercing stare, allowed her to turn on the ignition. She complied, albeit with mounting anxiety. Next he told her to put the car in gear. As usual, his directions were curt and incomplete. Carol did what she thought she had been told and the car lurched forward. The front bumper barely contacted the bumper of the car parked in front of her before our father, himself terrified, slammed on the brake. That was it. The lesson was over. Indeed, there was never to be another. Evidently Carol was as incompetent at following instructions as I had been. Nor would he allow her to forget it. Whenever the question of driving came up, he sternly admonished her not to consider the idea.
Joel’s interaction with his daughter Christine could not have been more different. Joel did not wait for Chris to beg him for driving lessons. As soon as she became eligible for a learner’s permit, he acceded to her requests to begin the learning process. Step by step, starting in their driveway, but quickly expanding outward into the adjacent neighborhood, he taught her the mechanics of driving. As she acquired one skill, he moved on to the next, and then the next. At no point did he yell at her, or so much as imply that she did not possess the necessary aptitudes. Of course, like any ordinary sixteen year old, Chris had her doubts. Moreover, like any normal adolescent, she made mistakes. At moments of stress she would give up in exasperation; or, at least, threaten to. But Joel would hear none of this. He was always there to assuage her fears. Yes, she could do it. No, there would be no disaster. They would just have to be patient. Perhaps they might have to wait until she calmed down, but once she did, he would talk her through the necessary steps. Unlike our father, Joel was an expert role-taker. He could sense what was frightening his daughter without her stating it. Then he would fill in the missing pieces. He would place a particular driving skill in a larger context. After this, he would deal with the micro-skills of which it consisted. This is the way you held the steering wheel; this is the manner in which you engaged in defensive driving; and so forth. More than once these lessons expanded into exercises in the philosophy of life. How did it feel to be responsible for so powerful a machine? Why were some other drivers so impatient, and how did one react to their impatience? These mini-seminars on interpersonal skills were not lectures so much as open-ended discussions. They were conversations between a father and his daughter in which they were both concerned to enlarge her vision of the universe.
What stuck me most about this process were Joel’s patience and encouragement. Unlike our father, he did not get visibly unsettled when things went wrong. Unlike him, he was less concerned with what Chris could not do than with what she could. Perhaps what impressed me most was a trip that we took to the airport to pick up our mother. Chris had never driven to the Tampa airport before. Nor had she taken such a long trip on an interstate highway. What was more, the vehicle she was driving was large. It was a full-size SUV. She could control the machine, but she was not completely sure of what to expect of the other drivers on a major road. From the beginning, Joel sat beside her as a kind of coach. All along the route, anticipating what she would encounter, he explained what was likely to happen and how to deal with it. When Chris became flustered, he was there with soothing praise. When she became unduly confident, he was along side with gentle reminders not to get ahead of herself. This was his beloved SUV, and like our father he could have panicked when it appeared to be in danger, but he did not. Cool and calm every step of the way, he maintained a firm grasp on his priorities. He understood that his daughter was more beloved to him than any mechanical device. Chris knew this too. She understood that she was in protective hands and it furnished the security to learn. Not surprisingly, she did learn. Not only did she discover that she could drive; she learned that she could be self-directed. She found that she could be sufficiently self-contained to make important decisions without following external orders.

One of the things that our father did not understand was that in order to delegate power comfortably, it was essential to feel powerful. Middle class professionals, as decentralized social leaders, are relatively influential. They make decisions that affect the lives of numerous others, which when push comes to shove, they are required to
enforce. As a result, they must not only be competent at making decisions, they must be able to win the tests of strength that afford them the respect needed to have their instructions heeded. My father, although he became an electronic engineer, always remained the Lower Eastside street kid who had been thrown into the East River by his boisterous pals. Unsure of his social position, or the legitimacy of his authority, he felt more threatened than necessary. Even his children, when they questioned his directives, became a source of anxiety. Their doubts suggested that he was less powerful than he pretended—which was intolerable. He could not allow himself to be inferior to his own offspring. Consequently, he came on stronger, and more peremptorily, than was required. The slightest hint of insubordination brought forth a torrent of invective and threats of physical coercion. Like John’s father, mine could not be wrong. Like John’s, he refused to discuss areas of disagreement with his children. To so do would have implied a lack of respect that was too chilling to contemplate.

A working class mentality, as opposed to a middle class mentality, is more fragile than its bluster suggests. Its demands for unquestioning obedience are a sign of insecurity, not confidence. Since, until not very long ago the working class constituted the most numerous social class, its attitudes linger in the childrearing patterns of newly professionalizing parents. In the same vein as my father and John’s, they remain mired in the doubts of their own childhoods. It is therefore these that they must overcome if they are to prepare their own children to become self-directed experts. A truly professionalized self, if he or she is to be personally professionalized, must, as a parent, acquire a self-motivated competence in childrearing. He or she must incorporate a variety of parenting skills that do not come naturally. Even though few formal courses in
middle class parenting are available, insights into these techniques, as well as a sense of social potency, are essential to preparing the next generation to carry forth the middle class torch. Newly professionalized selves must understand that this too is a sphere of knowledge to which they must aspire.

Almost a century ago, the sociologist Charles Cooley made a weighty discovery. In observing his own children while in the process of parenting them, he realized that their self-images were shaped by a compelling, yet subtle, phenomenon. The way they came to regard themselves was influenced by the way they were regarded by their caretakers. It became apparent that from infancy children perceived what they took to be their real selves as a reflection of what they detected in adult eyes. Cooley dubbed this phenomenon the *looking glass self*. It was as if a parent’s eyes were a mirror in which a child recognized his or her authentic qualities. If, for instance, a child looked up and saw warm loving eyes, he would conclude that he was worthy of being loved. On the other hand, staring into angry rejecting eyes sent the message that a child was unworthy of love. Somehow she was defective and merited rejection. None of this information was intellectually communicated. On the contrary, it was emotionally transmitted. But this made it more potent. Emotional messages have the ring of truth. Because they are difficult to forge, they tend to be accepted as valid. This is especially so with vulnerable children who have not yet learned to distinguish the real from the false. As a consequence, parents must be sensitive to the emotional communiqués they convey. They must understand that it is not only their overt orders, but the implicit ones that have an impact. Unless they are confident in their personal abilities, they may not be able to avoid becoming the inadvertent rivals of their children. Intentionally or not, they may
command them to desist from competing for power. Parents must likewise be sufficiently mature so that their emotional statements are consistent with their aims. Their true feelings, as expressed through eye contact, need to be congruent with what they hope to transmit. If not, this may handicap their youngsters by convincing them of limitations they do not possess.

In my own case, my father’s fears and furies were countermanded by the loving attentions of my grandmother Lizzie. The twinkle of affection in her eyes was unmistakable. It shouted more forcefully than any criticisms emanating from my Dad. Her smile told me that I might one day be capable of great things. Sigmund Freud apparently had a similar experience. He was his mother’s favorite child in the same way that I was my grandmother’s. In his memoirs, he explains that her emotional attentions persuaded him that he was a potential conquistador. Whatever the disadvantages of his social condition, her unspoken beliefs convinced him that he was more competent than his peers. This gave him the courage to sally forth to challenge the conventional beliefs of his milieu. He could be an innovator who made a difference because his mother’s eyes told him he would be loved even if others rejected him. The same gift is within the competence of almost any parent to bestow. Mothers and fathers who want their children to be autonomous decision-makers have it within their compass to convince them that they will be allowed to make independent choices. If they are authentically committed to this end; if deep down they believe in it, this will be apparent in what have often been called the windows to the soul. Over and above what they verbalize, they have to be the genuine article. They must allow themselves to be the sorts of adult who are comfortable raising successful children; otherwise their eyes will give their words the lie.
The lessons that need to be imparted by professionalized parents are quite diverse. This is all the more so as our social division labor becomes more ramified. But since no parent can be the master of all the skills a middle class child may one day be called on to master, competent parenting entails more than attaining a huge repertoire of skills. The competent parent must be flexible. It is more important for him or her to teach a child to learn how to learn than to encourage the internalization of specifiable abilities. If anything, parents who wish their children to succeed need to concentrate on social skills rather than technical ones. This is not to say that technical capabilities do not matter; it is rather that these are best acquired by offspring who are personally motivated to acquire them. Social skills, particularly those pertaining to winning tests of strength or negotiating social roles, are more critical to success than technological proficiencies. Those who put in the effort to attain the former can usually obtain the latter. Besides, social capacities, being emotionally grounded, are more difficult to achieve than cognitive or manual ones. They are also less consciously acquired. Daniel Goleman’s notion of emotional intelligence applies here. A high EQ (emotional quotient) is said to allow people to keep their jobs once they obtain them. It enables them to get along with co-workers, not just to be proficient in the technical details. Competent parents have to understand this. They must lay the foundation for emotional maturity. Moreover, if they are personally mature, they can contribute to the emotional suppleness needed to adjust to the uncertainties of a complex techno-commercial environment merely by being who they are.

Permissiveness
When my father was particularly angry with me he went for the strap. This was a leather belt with the buckle removed. I was required to bend over his knee as he administered the required quota of blows. If I did not voluntarily present myself for corporal punishment, the number of strikes was increased. If I ran away, woe betide me. Dad would become so incensed that the beating would begin wherever his hand managed to contact my body. If I cried, this became a pretext for increasing my sentence. Sometimes, although not often, my grandfather Simon was present during these occasions. When he was, he offered no sympathy. At some point, frequently while my tears were flowing, he would chuckle over how soft the younger generation had grown. When he was a child, he explained, his father chastised him with a cat-and-nine-tails. Moreover, he never cried as this tore into his flesh. Back in the old days children were tougher. They knew that it was their duty to be obedient, and this included submitting manfully to well-deserved penalties.

Here in the United States, our Puritan forefathers believed that it was essential to beat the devil out of children. This was not a figure of speech. They accepted as true the existence of a factual devil who lurked about trying to corrupt the vulnerable. Since no one was more vulnerable than young children, satanic blandishments threatened to lead them astray. The only way to prevent this was with the switch. As was repeatedly said, “spare the rod and spoil the child.” What might seem to us to be a form of cruelty was for them a form of compassion. To refrain from beating a child was to abandon her to the torments of hellfire. It was to allow Lucifer to make idle hands his workshop. Good Christians had to hold firm. They had to confront the devil head on. This attitude even extended into the schools. Reading and writing taught to the tune of the hickory stick
was the norm. The teacher who did not keep a switch close at hand was thought to encourage juvenile defiance. A so-called “board of education” (i.e., a paddle) was also thought an essential tool of the academic trade. Its presence made it clear that disobedience would not be tolerated.

How different are the attitudes of a professionalizing society. Today corporal punishment is regarded as abusive. To lay hands on a child, never mind to resort to a rod or strap, is thought brutal. It is believed to destroy a child’s spirit and to treat him or her as a slave. Slavery, along with the whippings and tortures associated with maintaining plantation discipline, are nowadays regarded as uncivilized. They are linked to the dark ages before people learned that everyone deserves to be treated with dignity. This “everyone” is now thought to include children. After all, they too are people. They are not property—they are not chattel. Their parents do not own them; hence they cannot be allowed to do with them whatever they will. Several years ago this became big news in the north Atlanta suburbs where I live. The newspapers and radio programs were full of talk about the arrest of a mother for brutalizing her son. It seems that the pair had been shopping at a local supermarket when the boy decided to defy his mother. He became so obstreperous that in her frustration, she slapped him. Had this occurred in the privacy of their home, nothing would have followed, but this was a public space. One of the clerks became so distressed that she called the police. When the officers arrived, she explained what she had seen, whereupon the mother was arrested. To strike a person, even one’s child, was deemed against the law. Eventually the charge was dismissed, but not before the mother spent some time in jail. As to the community reaction, it was divided. Some people thought that it was absurd to incarcerate a mother for exercising a normal parental
prerogative. Others, as vehemently, believed that hitting a child was an assault. They were not sure if an arrest was appropriate, but they agreed that a police intervention was.

When I asked my introductory sociology classes what they believed, the opinions were also divided. But they were skewed. Far and away, the majority considered corporal punishment justified. Almost every one of them admitted to having been physically chastised in growing up. Moreover, they adamantly insisted that had they not been spanked, they probably would have become spoiled. Spanking was not only acceptable; it was mandatory. When I mentioned my grandfather’s attitude, they were not prepared to go that far. A spanking with an open hand was one thing; a beating with a whip quite another. Most were not even amenable to the notion of spanking with a strap. Nor had they personally been disciplined with a ruler across the knuckles while attending school. Some were aware of the board of education. But only two or three went to a school that possessed one. When I changed the subject and asked what they thought about using a time out to discipline a child, most scoffed at the idea. Almost to a person they were convinced this was ineffective. Many asserted that if you sent a child to his or her room, all that happened was that the child received an opportunity to play with his toys.

Apparently this younger generation was caught between what was and what is coming into being. They could not abide the severe penalties of former times, but neither would they sanction a world without punishments. Having themselves grown up in society making the transition to a middle class ascendancy, they retained many of the customary attitudes of their working class ancestors. Most did not think in terms of what might be needed to develop self-direction as opposed to conformity. They just knew that
you sometimes had to force children to do what they did not want to do. Sometimes you
even had to inflict pain in order to elicit compliance. Contemptuous of the
permissiveness often preach by contemporary experts in parenting, they were
convinced that children cannot be allowed to do whatever they want. Confessing that had
they not been constrained by parental admonitions, they would have taken advantage of
this freedom to indulge in an inappropriate selfishness; for them, punishment was
common sense. Children had to be put in their place, otherwise they would never learn
what this place was.

Those who regard punishment as abusive respond by bemoaning the damage it
does to a child’s self-esteem. Much in the tradition of Cooley, they assert that physical
beatings send the wrong message. Using a strap, or even the back of a hand, violates a
child’s integrity. It screams out that the child’s desires are unimportant. Even a
youngerster’s pain is regarded as trivial. In other words, a chastised child is not permitted
to think well of him or herself when this conflicts with a parent’s desires. Only the
parent’s wishes presumably deserve respect. In fact, if a child is to acquire the self-
estee to become an autonomous decision-maker, he or she must be encouraged to think
of him or herself as special. Children have to be praised for what they can do, not merely
condemned for what they get wrong. Parents, who mirror juvenile strengths, thereby
sanction a pride in these abilities. This allows the young to gain confidence in powers
they will later risk asserting as adults. Permissiveness is thus an exercise in enabling
children to discover what they want and can do. It is a compassionate means of
sanctioning the internal freedoms that make self-direction possible.
It is with good reason that a cult of self-esteem has become associated with modern childrearing. The idea that a child who is allowed to be him or herself will grow into the best person he or she is capable of becoming is widespread. This theory, however, has been around since the days of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. What is new is the degree to which permissiveness has captured the hearts of modern educators. In schools of education across the land prospective teachers are indoctrinated in the notion that it is their duty to increase the self-esteem of their students. Children are never to be punished; only rewarded. They are not to be criticized, but praised. Even competition is discouraged. Losing out in combat with other children is thought to label the losers as failures. This is deemed intolerable because every child is believed to have a right to become a winner. Every one of them must have his or her ego stroked by being allowed to do well. As psychologists have demonstrated, reward is particularly effective in eliciting desired behaviors. It, rather than punishment, is accepted by its recipients as valid. Punishment, in contrast, is resisted. Not only does it hurt, but in being ego-dystonic, it is rejected. The best strategy is, therefore, to heap on the congratulatory language. Children must repeatedly be told that they are somebody of value. Only this procedure produces satisfactory results.

But hold on! Although permissiveness and self-esteem have become the conventional wisdom among the cognoscenti, they are a fraud. They do not produce the desired results. Children who are praised for whatever they do, do not grow into competent adults. Nor are those protected from the jarring effects of social competition liable to become effective adult competitors. Self-esteem based upon false praise rarely translates into skilful social performances. It may feel good, but feeling good is not the
same as being proficient. Individuals awash in phony self-esteem tend to predict that they will do better than they can. American students, for instance, having received marvelous grades in their math classes, frequently believe that they are excellent mathematicians. Yet achievement tests reveal that their knowledge is much less extensive than that of Asian students who do not believe they are as competent. A complacency born of undeserved praise discourages efforts to learn difficult lessons. It breeds incompetent decision-makers who are too inept to detect their inadequacies.

Permissiveness is a spurious palliative. It cannot take the place of internal discipline; hence it is not a viable alternative. The choice in childrearing is not between the coercive practices of the pre-middle class past and a total lack of parental coercion. The question is not whether force needs to be applied, but the degree and direction it should take. The inflexible brutality of yesteryear is indeed inimical to self-direction, but so is an abdication of parental responsibility. The actual lesson of modern psychology vis-à-vis discipline is not that reward works better than punishment, but that a combination of rewards and punishment works better still. The time-tested strategy of the carrot and the stick has not gone out of fashion. Learning self-direction is not accomplished by the equivalent of tossing a child into the waters of personal choice to rise or fall as fate dictates. Parents must help shape the learning process so that children discover how to make good choices. Limits must be set to protect the young from their own inexperience and to guide them in determining what they need to learn.

**Personal Discipline**

Setting limits, it must be acknowledged, sounds inimical to freedom. Preventing children from engaging in particular activities appears to contradict the notion of self-
direction. But this is deceptive. Imposing discipline on children is, in fact, similar to the restraints imposed on adults by intimate relationships. Intimacy is not fostered by unrestrained spontaneity. Neither is personal liberty. Like the compromises imposed by marriage, discipline is more a gateway to freedom than a deterrent to it. In preventing children from doing what might cause them, and others, harm, it preserves them to make decisions that would be unavailable were they, or others, injured. Moreover, in being controlled from the outside, they learn the rudiments of self-control. While it is true that excessive external controls interfere with personal decision-making, this does not have to be the case. Parental demands, if properly utilized, do not need to impose mindless conformity. They can function as the templates from which the young learn to attain personal discipline.

Before we discuss how this is achieved, self-control deserves a few words of tribute. Spontaneity is sometimes lauded for its vivacity. Those who act impulsively are thought to be more alive than those who censor their actions. Artless individuals are believed to be expressing their inner selves and therefore to be more in touch with who they are, whereas those who think before they act supposedly quash their unique spirits. This, however, is arrant nonsense. Complete spontaneity would be indistinguishable from a Hobbesian war of all against all. Infants who never learned to control their impulses would never learn to refrain from biting those who frustrate them. When they failed to receive what they wanted, they would lash out thoughtlessly. Self-control, in contrast, considers what is appropriate before acting. It allows a person to ask; Who do I want to be, before swinging into action. Self-control, that is to say, personal discipline, entails possessing the internal strength, and the good judgment, to choose the best
alternative before interacting with others. It is what separates human beings from hamsters. It is what allows people to become professionalized. How, indeed, could anyone become a self-motivated expert if he or she could not choose expertise over incompetence? How could anyone become self-motivated if he or she could not decide on one direction as opposed to another?

Parents who successfully teach self-discipline begin by being self-disciplined themselves. They do not impulsively strike out against their children merely because they get irritated. Frustration alone does not impel them to punish the objects of their wrath. The difficulties with impulsive parenting were made clear to me when I was young. My father, when I ran away from a spanking, became so incensed that he did not take notice of where his blows fell. His own emotional immaturity prevented him from controlling where he stuck. A more professionalized parent must be capable of considered judgments. He or she must be able to ask if a particular chastisement is deserved. He or she also needs to evaluate the best mode of achieving compliance. Fortunately, professionalized occupations promote the requisite self-control. It is difficult to be competent at complex techno-commercial tasks without acquiring the internal restraints needed to make appropriate choices. When these attitudes are brought home, they translate into appropriate parental discipline. They also provide a model to which children can aspire.

Self-disciplined parents are also likely to be aware of their relative power. Success at work provides them with the appropriate self-esteem. Being good at what one does makes it easier to assess one’s strengths and weaknesses with accuracy. Winners more correctly evaluate their failures because they do not believe these characterize their
overall status. As a result, they are less defensive when they return home. Not having to prove their strength by overawing a recalcitrant child, they do not demand immediate obedience. Powerful parents, parents who are in control of themselves, can afford to allow their children to internalize their own controls. They do not need to confirm their relative status by continuously enforcing imperious orders. This enables powerful parents to allow their children to adjust to the limits that they, as parents, must set. First, they do not feel constrained to set parameters for everything their children do. They can distinguish between protective restrictions and control for its own sake. Second, they do not require immediate and total compliance. When a child asks for a few extra minutes before coming to the dining room table, they do not interpret this as a personal affront. Nor do they throw a temper tantrum when the child refuses to consume each and every pea. They know that a child may need to demonstrate his own autonomy by making modifications in what is demanded. They realize that these trivial variations do not destroy parental authority.

The internalization of self-controls, it must be understood, is a voluntary undertaking. Behavior patterns do not become a child’s own, that is, they do not become self-selected, unless a child is allowed the latitude to make personal selections. That which is reluctantly performed in the face of overwhelming force cannot be a child’s own. It is an outside imposition that is apt to be discarded as soon as an absence of external supervision permits this. While it is true that without external discipline internal discipline does not arise, when external discipline is all-inclusive, this does not allow for internalization. A child must be granted the space to adjust to what is demanded. He or she must be afforded the time to think about it. He or she must be permitted to
personalize what is required. This is what time-outs are about. Children who are sent to
their rooms to contemplate what they did wrong are, in essence, being asked to think
things through. They are also being afforded the privacy and the time to reach an
acceptable conclusion. Were their thinking processes too closely monitored, they would
be more concerned with defying a hated tyrant than with deciding what is best. Were
they asked to promise immediate compliance, they would lie about what they have come
to believe in order to appease their oppressor. Children who are sent to time-outs
typically need time to come to terms with their anger. In having been exposed to external
constraints, they no doubt feel frustrated. And in being frustrated, they will feel angry.
All they will want to do is say No! The goal is defiance, not prudent cogitation. Only
after they have had sufficient time to calm down will they be clear-headed enough to
think through the situation. Only after this may they decide that it is best to accept part of
what has been demanded; that it was a bad idea to hit their little sister.

Self-control also comes from participation in deciding what needs to be
controlled. Discipline that is completely one-sided tends to be rejected. Since a child’s
behavior is unquestionably of concern to the child, he or she will want input into what is
decided. It will seem utterly unjust if every issue is resolved at the discretion of the
parent. Children learn to exercise discretion, in part, by being allowed to exercise it in
competition with adults. They, in essence, want to negotiate the ground rules with their
parents. When their parents make demands, they hope to make counter-demands. If
adults are permitted to exercise initiative, so, they believe, should they. Moreover,
children want the final decision to reflect their contributions. They want their views
respected. Indeed, they insist on being heard. It is under these circumstances that the
young are prepared to compromise and accept perspectives that did not originate with themselves. To put this in basic terms: if children are to internalize self-discipline, they require wiggle room. The require *limits with latitude*. This obliges parents not only to be self-disciplined, but flexible. While it is essential that adults have their children’s interests in mind, they must also allow them to exercise separate judgments. Mistakes will obviously be made, but a self-regulating expertise is only acquired by adjusting to mistakes. It is learning from both the outside, and the inside, that prepares children for the uncertainties of mature decision-making.

All of this give and take is fraught with uncertainty. Self-discipline might seem a matter of compelling oneself to do the right thing, but, as most adults, learn it is difficult to ascertain what is right. There are times it is necessary to take one’s best guess, then hope things turn out well. These inherent uncertainties are even more disquieting for the young. Both relatively ignorant and relatively powerless, whatever their pretensions to omniscience, they are wracked with insecurities. These anxieties are often revealed in their ambivalence regarding adult authority. On the one hand, they are apt to dismiss parental suggestions as old-fashioned nonsense; on the other, they project a protective infallibility on Mom or Dad. One day they stomp out of the house railing about the stupidity of a particular restriction; the next they depend on their parents to rescue them from an adolescent misadventure. Given this tension between a desire for independence and one for protection, efforts at internalizing self-discipline will always be impeded by insecurities. This means that in addition to imposing, and flexibly enforcing, essential controls, parents must be emotionally supportive. They need to be authoritative; but loving. When things go wrong, when their children are thrown into a tizzy by
unexpected setbacks, they must be there to offer comfort. Fear is the mortal enemy of
self-discipline. Terror makes it virtually impossible to exercise self-control. All a
terrified person wants to do is run away. Anger is also a mortal enemy of self-discipline.
Rage is as out of control as terror. It wants to lash out in homicidal fury, but is as stupid
and impulsive. Loving parents thus temper these excesses by offering reliable assurance.
They need to be dependably present while their children are in the process on learning
self-control.

When I was a child and in a quandary about what to do, I sometimes approached
my father for advice. As reluctant as I was to acknowledge it, he did have more
experience than I. Moreover, he was flattered that I had the confidence to seek his
assistance. The problem was that he had his own insecurities regarding decision-making.
Although he intended to provide emotional support, his fears and resentments interfered
with these aims. Thus, when he offered advice, it was not advice; it was an order. He
would say, Son, this is what I think you should do, but if I failed to heed his suggestions
to the letter, he would explode in a towering rage. He could not remain in control when
he was personally frustrated, and he was personally frustrated by implicit doubts about
the validity of his guidance. As ability to provide loving support is thus contingent upon
a lack of defensiveness. Parents who aim to teach self-control need emotional maturity
as well as self-discipline.

**An Emotional Transition**

As the middle class revolution has unfolded, and as more people have become
professionalized selves, it has become more apparent that self-discipline provides a
critical foundation for personal professionalism. Without internalized affective controls,
personalized decision-making is seriously impaired. But it has also become apparent that emotional maturity is essential for effective self-discipline. Self-directed social leaders must be emotionally competent individuals. They have to be able to handle intense emotions like anger and fear. Likewise, they have to be capable of teaching their children how to handle extreme feelings. If they, as adults, are to avoid being tossed about by emotional storms they neither understand nor master, they must learn not to regard feelings as unfathomable mysteries. For them, strong emotions have to become natural phenomena that can be investigated and managed. They must, one day, come to regard themselves as experts on emotionality and the techniques necessary to deal with intense emotionality.

When, once upon a time, most people belonged to the working class, self-control, and, therefore, emotional control was not an issue. Needless to say, human beings, including children, were then as potentially impulsive as they are now. Vital controls were, however, provided from the outside. Threats of punishment from above kept most people in line most of the time. If they did what they were told, this was generally adequate to perform the relatively simple jobs for which they were responsible. What parents did in the privacy of their homes, with respect to childrearing, scarcely mattered when few children were groomed for decentralized expertise. The conversion to a middle class lifestyle altered the social landscape, but it did not revise the traditional verities about parenting or emotionality. Children were still not supposed to be spoiled, while strong emotions remained inscrutable. In time, changes in the conventional wisdom occurred, but these have not always proved useful. Parenting advice went from “spare the rod” to let them “do their own thing,” and attitudes about the emotions moved from
the “stiff upper lip” to “let it all hang out.” Nevertheless, neither permissiveness nor a romanticized emotionality is appropriate to professionalization. With regard to both childrearing and emotional maturity, informed control is required.

The cornerstone of self-direction is emotional strength. Without an ability to endure intense feelings, human beings are at the mercy of unguided passions. Whatever the pronouncements of some alleged authorities, being able to cry at the drop of a hat is not a mark of personal power. Nor is a willingness to scream out one’s indignation whenever one feels slighted. Those who are so intimidated by strong emotions that these are automatically suppressed, or so enamored of them that they are expressed no matter the circumstances, will not find this conducive to exercising independent expertise. These may be natural human reactions, but they are not always appropriate. This said, despite their dangers, emotions are a crucial instrumentality. They are central to the application of personal effort. People who do not feel, or occasionally feel strongly, are hardly ever moved to action. Fundamentally unconcerned about what is happening around them; they are not motivated respond. Yet for a response to be valuable, it must be controlled. Feelings that are not socialized, that is, feelings that have not been modified by social learning, tend to produce unhelpful results. Uncontrolled emotions have a penchant for shouting fire in a crowded theater. They produce stampedes, not orderly evacuations. Conversely, unsocialized emotions may sit crying in the corner for decades. They do not stand up and get on with life.

Many people believe that emotional strength, which is to say, an ability to experience strong emotions while channeling their expression in useful directions, is a congenital gift. They are convinced that you are either born with emotional controls or
not. This, however, is a romantic view of sentiments. It is a view that holds them to be mysterious and beyond expert manipulation. It is a view that says if you are afraid, all you can do is run away and hide; and that if you are angry, the best you can hope for is a mild explosion. In fact, emotional strengths can be acquired. More than this, they must be learned and transmitted from one generation to the next if professionalization is to become widespread. Fear can be less intimidating if it is recognized for what it is; anger can be less homicidal if its energies are conducted along productive pathways. When they are socialized, strong emotions become a mechanism for achieving positive outcomes—as opposed to unwanted failures.

The way emotional socialization works needs to be examined. Let us start with fear. When a person is afraid, the feeling he or she experiences sends the message that something dangerous is in the vicinity. The emotion also motivates a person toward fight or flight. The individual will either feel impelled to stay and defeat the threat or to flee toward safer ground. But what is identified as a danger, and how the fight or flight are implemented, is subject to a learning curve. Babies are victimized by a host of instinctual terrors. Loud noises, mysterious shadows in the dead of night, or losing sight of one’s mother can cause howls of alarm. Infants do not evaluate these threats so much as seek to escape them the best way they can, namely by appealing for a rescue. As they grow older, however, they learn to distinguish between hazards. They come to realize that the headlight of a passing automobile cast that mysterious shadow in the middle of the night. Its specter then feels less dangerous. They also learn to walk, and, therefore, to run away without being picked up by a parent. The problem comes in when a fear is so profound that it transmutes into terror. When a person, including an infant, is terrified, fear
becomes primitive. It ceases to be evaluated coolly or responded to intelligently. The head is so filled with messages of alarm that learning no longer occurs. The person instead runs headlong into greater dangers, which elicit still greater terrors. At such moments, the idea of self-control becomes an absurdity.

What needs to intercede, at least in part, is incremental tolerance. A person needs to be exposed to fears in small doses so as to make them less threatening. If the danger is confronted in small pieces, none of which is individually overwhelming, the terror eventually subsides such that a threat can be dealt with more clear-headedly. Public speaking is a case in point. The mere prospect terrifies many people. But if this is dealt with incrementally, it can lose its dread. A person can begin with small groups and simple topics and graduate to larger audiences and more challenging subjects. As long as he or she does not proceed at a faster pace than can be managed, the end result is likely to be better than initially imagined. This sort of courage is obviously an accomplishment. It is not a matter of becoming fearless, but of learning to exhibit grace under pressure. And this is precisely what parents need to impart to their children during the decades they are under their tutelage. As long as parents themselves have learned to increase their courage by incrementally mastering their terrors, they can share what they have discovered with their young. They can slowly, and carefully, reveal that many dangers are less perilous than they first appear. They can also demonstrate that some threats can be safely turned back without fear of injury. The secret is not expecting instant valor. Parents who are afraid of dealing with social hazards may want their children to exhibit an immunity to dangers. They, as it were, want their children’s courage to serve as a shield for their own doubts. This was something my father expected. If I were daring,
this would be evidence that he was doing his job right. As a result, he demanded that I be fearless when, in fact, I was consumed with misgivings. Such pressures, however, increase a child’s fears and make them impenetrable. Patience, not additional demands, allows incremental tolerance to work its magic. Patience enables a parent to stand shoulder to shoulder with a child as the youngster slowly learns to internalize an understanding of specific threats.

The same sort of logic applies to anger. When anger becomes especially strong, it transmutes into rage, and rage, being a primitive emotion, is as difficult to master as terror. Anger, when it occurs, sends the message that a person is being frustrated. There is something important that he or she desires that is not being achieved. In addition, the greater the frustration, the stronger the anger. This irritation subsequently motivates the pursuit of what is desired. When they are infuriated, people work long and hard to obtain what they crave. Moreover, one of the ways this emotion operates is by intimidating others into giving the angry person what is wanted. If others can be frightened by one’s wrath, they may decide that the safest course is to appease the attacker. Of course, all this can go wrong if others decide to fight rather than to flee. The aggressor may then have a battle royal on his hands. Furthermore, when anger has become primitive, that is, when it has been converted into rage, its ability to distinguish whether it will elicit compliance is impaired. As a consequence, rage tends to provoke fights it cannot handle. Immature anger is thus always sparking battles that make it difficult to obtain what is desired. Grossly inexpert in assessing the motives of others, it interferes with professionalization by making cooperation virtually impossible.
Obviously, anger too must be socialized. Parents need to teach their children to assess both why and how they get angry. Instead of going on automatic pilot, children need to pause before attempting to extract compliance from others. They have to be able to judge whether their target is indeed the cause of a particular frustration. They must similarly ascertain whether this other is capable of providing what is desired. If not, their rage, no matter how voluble, is destined to elicit further frustration. It cannot get what someone cannot give. As importantly, how and where anger is applied makes a difference. Words, rather than a punch in the nose, are typically more effective in obtaining positive results. Quiet anger, rather than shouted insults, is likewise a better bet to bring the desired compliance. Quiet verbalizations, however, do not come spontaneously. Most children, if allowed to follow their instincts, resort to tantrums. They assume that the more energy they invest in pitching a fit, the more likely they are to come out ahead. Their parents need to set them straight. They must exercise the power to restrain their youngster’s impulses and model more effective interventions. Anger does not have to be allowed to be instinctive; it can be informed by intelligence and incremental efforts to be kept under control.

Unfortunately, one of the legacies of working class conformity is oppositionalism. Those raised in an environment where losing tests of strength is the norm, may be so consistently frustrated that unrestrained rage becomes the norm. Instead of calculating what is in their interest, they are consumed by a desire for revenge. Should someone be perceived as an enemy, that is, should someone of greater status put forward a suggestion, the first impulse is to say no. Rather than intelligently computing what might meet their personal needs, they seek to frustrate the desires of those believed to be
frustrating them. Much like toddlers in the throes of the terrible twos, they attempt to assert their independence by pursuing the opposite of what more powerful others seem to want. The difficulty with this strategy is that it is inimical to competent decision-making. The expertise required for social leadership rarely derives from reflexive hostility. Among other things, mindless resentments are detrimental to long-term planning. Automatic opposition does not think many steps into the future. Strictly emotional in its reaction, it is unlikely to think at all.

Parenting for social mobility does not do as my father did. It does not impulsively take the saw out of a child’s hand. It does not, in frustration, cancel a child’s initiative. This too is a form of oppositionalism. Rather than understand what a child needs, or patiently explain what has to be done, it denies the validity of the child’s difficulties. The youngster is thus treated as an enemy. But this too fails to think ahead. It fails to engage in role-taking so that appropriate lessons can be imparted. In the end, this does not help a child master her frustrations. It merely increases a sense of defeat and either encourages out of control violence or retreatist isolation. In all likelihood, this will not be the parent’s objective. Whatever his or her personal disappointments, there is little to be gained by sabotaging a child’s life chances. It, therefore, makes sense, before becoming a parent, to pursue emotional maturity. Besides the personal advantages of being in control of private passions, the carry-over in terms of an ability to think through suitable responses when engaged in the emotional socialization of a child can be gratifying. Becoming a stepping-stone toward a young person’s success has its own pleasures.
Hitting the Social Mobility Wall

John hit the wall. As angry as he was, he always hoped to overcome his demons so that he could move forward into a normal life. While he did not share this aspiration with many people (lest he jinx his chances), his relationship with his girlfriend at first appeared to bode well. Sharing intimacies with her, and conceiving a child together, led him to believe he too could live a conventional life; a life that would, for him, have represented success. But John was too angry. His efforts to become middle class sparked a rage he could not manage. In attempting to work through his residual issues with his father, he unleashed furies that eventually led to murder and suicide. Like many people, albeit with more difficulty, he sought personal growth. Like many others, albeit with more serious implications, he was trapped by his personal history. The very act of seeking to manage his emotions released them to do ill. For John, the internal wall he encountered was real. It would not permit him to reach goals he could see, but not touch. The end of his story was tragic. Nevertheless frustrated ambitions are common. Many who seek social mobility find it impossible to become professionalized selves. Barriers they cannot understand or surmount hinder them too.

Miriam was luckier than John. She too, of course, grew up in a household that did not nurture her ambitions. Indeed, at the beginning of her career, it appeared that she might become as frustrated as he. Fortunately, events allowed her an escape. Her initial efforts to move forward were, however, stymied by an interpersonal strategy that perpetuated her dilemma. For her, the wall took the form of a religious cult that
recapitulated the promises of her childhood. At first, she hoped that she could overcome the instabilities of alcoholism by converting the spiritual aspirations of her childhood into constructive realities. But this made her vulnerable to false promises that prevented actualizing her potential. It was only when she ran away from a sectarian delusion that she could begin to grow toward middle class maturity. Fortunately, unlike John, in saying No to her past, she did not have to commit violence. Eventually, she could even enter upon rites of passage that cut many of her ties to a dysfunctional youth.

In time, Miriam even allowed herself to grow strong enough to manage the challenges of personal success. Although she never deliberately engaged in formal procedures dedicated to breaking free, she participated in activities that had this effect. One of the most important of these was writing a book that chronicled her experiences. This enabled her to work through many of the terrors that kept her enslaved by her history. In this, many others may find an echo of their own life stories. They too have repeated unworkable plans intended to overcome obstructions without consciously understanding what they were doing. Fortunately for many of them, like Miriam, but unlike John, their efforts facilitated arriving at a more hopeful place. Many may even have been able to achieve personal growth although they did not fully recognize what they were doing. They are among the lucky ones.

I myself have had the experience of hitting a wall. What makes my tale somewhat different is that circumstances forced me to become conscious of how to proceed. As with many people raised in a working class milieu, I grew up forced to be obedient, but resenting every minute of it. As a consequence, I wanted out and daydreamed of the liberation to come. For me, this salvation would owe to my academic
abilities. I would presumably do well enough in college to be accepted to a graduate program that would supply the credentials for vocational success. The first indication that this might not work came during my undergraduate years. Just as with many of my peers, I could not settle on a major. I vacillated between physics, chemistry, psychology, and philosophy. In the end, I decided upon philosophy because it promised to answer the crucial question of how a person should live. For someone who had not been allowed to set his own priorities, this was of vital importance. The trouble was that the professors in the graduate program I soon began did not seem to know either. As best I could tell, they were scurrying around chasing their academic tails. This was so disappointing I gave up in disgust. Leaving, however, did not solve my problem. If anything, it introduced me to a more imposing barrier. Now I had no goals at all. At this point, I hadn’t a clue about how to save myself. If I were not going to have an academic career, what sort of career was it to be? For the moment, there was no answer. It seemed that I might be destined to be the failure my father always predicted.

At this juncture, lacking a plan of my own, I sought the advice of the philosophy professor I regarded as a mentor while an undergraduate. Martin Lean had always struck me as one of the most intelligent, levelheaded persons I knew. Although he was sometimes acerbic, he quickly and incisively cut to the central issue of almost any argument. What would he think of my predicament? Would he be able to offer a way out? When I asked, the answer came as a bombshell. After carefully listening to my tale of woe, he knit his brow and very slowly posed a question I had never asked myself. Did I, he inquired, ever consider the possibility of going into psychotherapy? Then he added something equally surprising. He revealed that when he was my age, and having similar
doubts about his future, he had gone into therapy and it proved a lifesaver. I sat there
dumbfounded. This was not what I expected. Professor Lean had always seemed to be
one of the sanest people around. That he could have required psychotherapy came as a
shock. My attitude toward psychotherapy, having been deeded me by my father, was
entirely negative. This sort of treatment, as I had been assured, was for crazy people.
The introspection it demanded was not only foolish; it was guaranteed to drive you
insane. Since my father had always insisted that I was utterly bereft of common sense,
entering therapy would only confirm that I was damaged goods. This was not something
I intended to do. But here was professor Lean talking about this as if it were the most
natural thing in the world. If there ever were a moment when I was confronted with the
need to rethink a settled belief, this was it. What would I do? The answer was quick in
coming.

Within weeks I was in psychotherapy and for years thereafter was consumed by
efforts at overcoming the wall I had stumbled upon. Why was I the way I was? Why
did I experience such difficulty in succeeding? If I were really as smart as I thought, why
couldn’t I think my way out of this quandary? After all, wasn’t success a matter of being
logical? As someone who had invested his ambitions in educational achievement, I
bought into the notion that disciplined knowledge could overcome any adversity.
Knowledge, as I had been reassured, was power. How then could knowledge fail to
deliver me from my frustrations? Psychotherapy introduced me to the concept that the
reasons were, in fact, manifold. People often got trapped in ways of life that, because
they were human, were not amenable to cognitive solutions. At minimum, emotions had
something to do with keeping them immobilized. These would have to be recognized for what they were if I were to move forward. I would have to feel, not merely think.

There are many reasons why people have difficulty achieving social mobility. In the last chapter we saw that socialization can go seriously wrong. And when it does, it can leave scars. It can introduce internalized scripts that make it difficult for a person to move beyond past defeats. In earlier chapters we also reviewed what is necessary for professionalized success in a middle class society. People who hope to become self-motivated experts must develop knowledge, negotiate satisfying social roles, win tests of strength that confer status, and cultivate voluntary intimacy. They must perceive where they are going so that their *Roles, Ranks* and *Relationships* meet their personal needs. Sadly, for some people, the way they are raised makes this virtually impossible. They are so damaged by their interpersonal losses that merely separating from their families of origin is not enough. They have to let go of their defeats before they can move on. Not merely intellectually, but emotionally, they have to become their own persons.

Engaging in the sorts of behavior needed to move up is more than a matter of correct thinking. Progress, it is true, can be impeded by difficulties in thinking. If people are unable to assimilate the lessons needed to become expert, they may have trouble being professional. When confronted with an unfamiliar problem, they will not know where to turn. Their technical skills will fail them and they will be unable to serve as social pathfinders. But they may also suffer from a deeper problem. Like me, their intelligence may desert them. At such moments, they will find their heads swimming. In this case their ability to learn will be swamped by emotional difficulties. They may know perfectly well how to research a technical glitch, but because their internal
motivation has been thrown off center, they will be at sea with respect to life in general. They may not even care about solving particular vocational dilemmas, because they have no idea about what sort of person they hope to be.

The traditional three R’s, namely reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic, are important. They are vital to achieving professional expertise. But there is an equally important cluster of three R’s. As described above, these are roles, ranks, and relationships. These too must be mastered if a person is to be a social success. Someone who is trapped in dysfunctional roles, inferior ranks, or unbalanced relationships is liable to be unhappy and therefore handicapped by this unhappiness. He or she will not feel successful. Having been denied attainment of life’s most vital needs, there will be an emptiness that refuses to go away. What is more, thus tied down by intractable frustrations, there will be little energy left over to cut one’s ties to old losses. Unsatisfying roles ranks and relationships are emotionally debilitating. They prevent a person from utilizing his or her abilities. In this, they ensure further defeats by motivating an individual to repeat old mistakes. Only letting go of these albatrosses can remedy what is wrong.

Social roles are, as it were, the fourth R. Good roles are fundamental personal satisfaction. They point us toward measures that are essential to meeting individual and social needs. As a result, when they are defective, they can cause great pain. Dysfunctional roles are restrictive. In allowing some actions, they prevent others that might be more rewarding. Thus, if, in growing up, a person is assigned the role of scapegoat, upward mobility becomes problematic. It is difficult for someone to become a social leader when most of his time is devoted to warding off unwarranted assaults. Nor is being the butt of criticism likely to inspire confidence in one’s leadership qualities.
What is worse, although a scapegoat may wish to be released from the torment of a childhood filled with reproach, he will have internalized role scripts that perpetuate this bondage. He will have accepted a self-image, emotional reactions, personal values, and social norms that keep him enacting the part of a scapegoat. Not even adulthood may end this agony. Because the scapegoat has been convinced that these accusations are valid, he recreates updated relationships based on similar allegations. His latest role partners are almost surely as unfair as those that instilled the original role. The problem becomes how to escape this ordeal. How does a person move on to adopt more agreeable roles? What exacerbates this dilemma is that the wall preventing emancipation is largely internal. A person’s own commitment to childhood beliefs, feelings, and attitudes prevent walking through what might otherwise be an open door.

How then is someone to see what is possible? How can he or she recognize potential avenues to success? Knowledge alone will not do because dysfunctional scripts interfere with learning. Moreover, a person’s emotional and volitional commitments keep recycling long-standing behaviors. Dysfunctional roles are like hamster treadmills. They keep people running around in circles, unable to perceive that they are engaged in stereotyped performances. Scapegoats, caretakers, family heroes, perpetual rebels, and sex addicts rarely recognize the need to renegotiate their roles. So obsessed are they doing what is expected of them that they never learn how to contract better deals.

The same sort of personal confinement can stem from hierarchical failures. In this case, people are undone by what may be designated the fifth R. The substandard structural ranks to which they have been consigned keep them weak and unhappy. Those who have been shunted into inferior social statuses seldom learn to triumph in the tests of
strength needed to become autonomous, self-directed experts. Having been tutored in the nuances of losing, they never develop the habits required of social leaders. Unable to assert themselves because they remain intimidated by childhood defeats, they cling to their reputations as losers. As a corollary, they are unreliable allies. Those in the quest for social success do not seek their cooperation because it may not be forthcoming. Too politically inept to contemplate fighting city hall, they dream of attaining middle class preeminence, but assiduously avoid the confrontations needed to attain it. At best diverted by the temptations of ill-advised shortcuts, even when they succeed, their prospects are undermined by the brittleness of their tactics. People who grow up as losers have a tendency to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. So uncomfortable are they in positions of power that they are fearful of challenges they may be unable to rebuff. As a result, they often provoke the battles they dread. And then, because of their anxieties, they overdo their response or they are paralyzed into inaction. Either way, they are imprisoned in defeat by their self-doubts.

The sixth R may also be troublesome. If dysfunctional roles and inferior ranks can be barriers to success, so do impaired relationships. Because we human beings form long-term attachments to other human beings, when these are defective, they can inflict considerable damage. Because we are as inclined to establish loving relationships as social divisions of labor and hierarchical positions, these too go wrong. People may have difficulty finding someone to love, or, having found someone, are subjected to tortures by an unworthy partner. In both cases, the need to defend against waves of pain can divert attention from what is necessary for competent professionalization. Since no one has unlimited reserves of energy, a need to guard against the anguish of personal loneliness
can diminish the strength available for becoming a self-motivated expert. This is a predicament often suffered by individuals who grow up deprived of love. Having learned that they are unworthy of affection, they compound their torment by acting as if this were true. They then build their own walls by never discovering how to negotiate suitable intimacy. Regularly attracted to selfish role partners, they scarcely ever demand fair treatment. As a consequence, they are unhappy. Worse still, rather than seek success, they are obsessed with avoiding further pain.

When I was in psychotherapy, I encountered this second collection of three R’s. I discovered that knowledge was not enough to overcome personal failures. If I were going to break through, I would also have to smash the obstacles created by dysfunctional roles, inferior ranks, and defective relationships. If I wanted to become a social leader, I would have to liberate myself from the fortifications into which I had been driven. More than this, because I was engaged in maintaining these barriers, this was a task in which I would have to be actively engaged. I could not depend upon others to set me free. There would be no skyhook to reel me up. Success would take personal effort; plus an understanding of what was necessary. In this, as I would later learn, I was not alone. Many millions of people have been trapped in less than successful places. They too have been stymied by role, rank, and relationship problems. They likewise had been assigned dysfunctional roles, inferior ranks, and defective relationships, which in concert acted as a barricade to achieving their aspirations. They too needed to find a way to break through, that is, if they were to become self-directed members of the middle class. The question was how to achieve this; how to attain personal liberation? What did people need to do to become what they were capable of being? The appropriate escape hatch, it
turns out, entails more than a voluntary decision to change. It involves more than will power or personal effort. Resocialization is usually necessary.

*Resocialization* is the seventh R. It is not about knowledge. Nor is it about roles, ranks, or relationships per se. Resocialization is the process of reversing defective socialization. It is about letting go of losses. It is a mechanism for overcoming the internalized barriers to success put in place when we were young. If people are to become self-motivated experts, they cannot afford to be bound to archaic motives implanted when they were small. They cannot afford to be hemmed in by an interior wall of beliefs, emotions, and volitional commitments that prevent doing what is needed to become a competent winner. In order to be self-directed, that is, in order to be free to make appropriate decisions, directives forced upon us when we were too immature to know what was best cannot continue to enslave us. Even so, resocialization is not for the feint of heart. It is a lengthy and painful procedure that does not automatically take place. People who want to engage in personal growth, that is, people who wish to become strong enough to be social winners, have to engage in the equivalent of psychotherapy. They cannot, like John, be so emotionally fragile that the effort to fix what is broken makes things worse. This would leave them stuck where they are. Thankfully, some individuals are more fortunate. Like Miriam, they find that they can engage in resocialization by inadvertence. Without intending to, they take the steps needed to break free from childhood straightjackets. But others, like me, must be more conscious in approaching personal growth. Some may even need professional assistance in facilitating the process. Whatever the case, all will find that success does not come cheap. They will learn that becoming a professionalized self takes a substantial investment.
**Psychiatric Malpractice**

The Rochester Psychiatric Center was housed in a mini-skyscraper. A red brick monstrosity, it stacked ward upon ward in monotonous despair. When stepping off the central elevators, one confronted three closed wings, two of which housed patients. A skeleton key was needed to open the heavy metal doors that gave access to these inner sanctums. Once inside, there were always several inmates loitering around in the hopes that the new arrival would neglect to relock the portal. These poor souls were longing to escape. Tired of surroundings that were uniformly bleak, they sought immediate release. Had they given up and returned to where they were supposed to be, they would have walked through halls painted a dingy institutional green, passed by a series of tiny padlocked bedrooms, and wandered into a common room in which their bored fellow patients spent countless hours pretending to watch television. The hospital regimen deprived them of privacy, denied them sensory or social stimulation, and subjected them to preemptory instructions from battalions of insensitive attendants. It was not the sort of place most people would choose to vacation. Once upon a time, when the institution was founded, it was referred to as an asylum. It was intended as a place of refuge where the mentally ill could be protected from the demands of ordinary life. Instead, it became, if not a snake pit, a dreary detention center. Patients stayed because they were forced to stay. They did not regard the place as a hospital or a safe haven. They might understand that it was best that they remain within its confines, but they hated the idea that they suffered from a mental condition that required this.

When I was young my father convinced me that I was so strange I verged on being crazy. My resistance to his efforts to enforce compliance with his directives was
daily portrayed as a mental defect. In opposing his orders, I presumably demonstrated a lack of common sense that probably derived from an impaired brain. Even going through psychotherapy had not completely purged me of the fear that he might be right. Indeed, one of the primary reasons I had sought employment at a psychiatric hospital was to determine if I were fundamentally insane. The answers I received were reassuring—if not for my patients, then certainly for me. There was a tremendous difference in the sorts of problems from which we were suffering. I, it became plain, was contending with role, rank, and relationship difficulties, whereas they were enduring the manifestations of genuine mental illness. I might be stuck in behaviors that were counterproductive; I might even be unhappy because I could not achieve my goals, but they suffered from physiological conditions that prevented normal thought or emotions. My brain worked just fine; theirs did not. The difference, when encountered in the flesh, was unmistakable. I managed to stay in contact with reality even when I did not like it; their hold on it, was more tenuous.

Henry was a good example of what it meant to be genuinely mentally ill. Schizophrenia, and especially catatonic schizophrenia, is a horrendous condition. Schizophrenics are not, as some allege, noble savages more in touch with hard truths than normal people. They are not gallant innocents who have eluded the corrupting influences of civilization. No, they are individuals tortured by mental flaws they can neither control nor evade. Henry hated being schizophrenic. He hated the breakdown in his teenage years that converted him from a promising high school student into a motionless lump of protoplasm. When in the depths of catatonia, he could barely move or talk. Hospital attendants needed to force-feed him just to keep him alive. Even when he emerged from
this state, Henry was trapped by an inability to communicate. Most of the time, he spoke in halting riddles that had to be deciphered by sensitive listeners. Still physically stiff, he was aware that his messages were both camouflaged and incomplete—which frustrated him and his interlocutors alike. Henry knew that he was different and that he could not prevent himself from being different. Those who dealt with him came to the same conclusion. While most liked his sweet temperament, an invisible barrier interfered with normal conversation kept them at an emotional distance. It was as if Henry were not quite human, even though he was obviously a fully formed person. Something about the way his mind worked was clearly different from the minds one encountered outside the hospital. In some way or other, Henry’s brain was physiologically broken.

So aware are schizophrenic patients of being mentally defective that a significant number choose death over the psychological constraints they cannot master. This was the case with Roger. When I worked with him he was apparently making huge advances toward normality. He had moved out of the hospital, taken a regular job in the community, and even begun to socialize with women. But Roger had communicated something ominous to me while still an in-patient. He said that if his psychotic symptoms ever returned, he would rather die. He did not want to endure readjustments in his medications or return to the psychiatric center for a tune-up. In time, given his accomplishments, this admonition faded from my memory. Then one day, during mid-winter, I noticed that Roger had left his sweater behind after a counseling session. Thinking little of this, I placed it aside so as to return it to him during our next visit. About two weeks later he stopped by just to say hello, but when I advised him to take his sweater, he asked me to hold on to it. This I did with nary a second thought. Then, about
two weeks after this I heard the news. Roger had killed himself. He had stepped in front of a speeding train. Only at this point did I realize that the sweater had been a parting gift. Roger had wished to thank me for my help, but not in a way that would alert me to his impending suicide. Roger wanted to die. He hated his mental condition that much.

To confuse mental illness with role, rank, and relationship problems is an egregious error. These circumstances are so drastically different that to place them in the same category is to refuse to make a critical distinction. It is essentially to lie about the nature of reality. And yet this is an error that psychiatrists routinely make. They piously diagnose both schizophrenia and barriers to personal success as mental disorders. So grave is this mistake that it amounts to psychiatric malpractice. Not only are the mechanisms that create these conditions different; they require different interventions to correct what has gone wrong. To treat them as if they were comparable condemns millions of people to inappropriate treatments. As a consequence, psychiatrists oblige those who believe them to remain stuck where they do not have to be. More particularly, assimilating role, rank, and relationship problems to a medical model promises cures when no such cures are available. It suggests that people suffer from a reversible physiological defect, where no such defect exists.

Physicians have dealt with personal distress for millennia. They have long sought to replace superstition with scientific insight. In this, they have been enormously successful. A myriad of physical diseases, from the measles to cancer to heart disease, have yielded to their specialized knowledge. Hundreds of millions are alive today because doctors have systematically studied the causes of biological maladies. But this very success has bred arrogance. Physicians, like Napoleon Bonaparte in his Russian
campaign, have been tempted to invade uncongenial territory. Because their previous incursions have proved so fruitful, they assume that they can do whatever they set their minds to. Moreover, they are cheered on by legions of laypersons who also assume that they will ultimately prevail. Widely deemed authorities in coping with the mysterious, doctors are thought to be too smart to be foiled by personal enigmas. Clearly the distress caused by role, rank, and relationship problems qualifies as mysterious. Its origins have been long been shrouded in obscurity and myth. No wonder that the emotional storms associated with hitting the social mobility wall have been medicalized. They are so painful, yet so resistant to rational explanation, that medical answers have seemed better than none at all. As is generally acknowledged, medicine has a proud record of decoding mysteries. It has explained how the blood circulates around the body, how invisible creatures cause life-threatening fevers, and why antibiotics restore health. Why should it not also explain the anxieties and depressions that incapacitate people as they strive for success? And, why shouldn’t psychiatrists be called upon to minister to these symptoms?

Those who have hit the social mobility wall usually offer no objections to this approach. In fact, they are comforted by the idea of being rescued by science. Beset by inexplicable fears, uncontrollable rages, and desperate despair, their ability to understand why they are trapped in failure is gravely impaired at the same time that the pain of this impairment cries out for relief. In other words, they hurt so badly, for such puzzling reasons, that they willingly accept salvation from whatever appears to be an authoritative source. And what, nowadays, could be more authoritative than science. When psychiatrists describe normal anxieties and depressions as mental disorders, it is assumed that they are relating empirical discoveries. It sounds as if they have made observational
findings about how the mind works. Yet this is not the case. They have not revealed a physical defect that causes depression or anxiety. Despite high-minded pronouncements, science, when it gives make-believe answers, is not science, but scientism. It may observe the rituals of science, but it is not following the canons of an honest, disciplined search for truth. In fact, psychiatry does not have any special insights into role, rank, and relationship problems. It is, after all, not a social science, but a medical specialty. While it has a lot to say about the genetic underpinnings of schizophrenia, it has little to add about social roles, human hierarchies, or intimate personal relationships. To act as if it does is an unmitigated fraud.

If taken seriously, psychiatric imperialism, in asserting an expertise in all aspects of depression and anxiety, impugns the reputations of many great people. It suggests, for instance, that Abraham Lincoln was a mental cripple. As the Atlantic Magazine writes, in today’s atmosphere “he’d be called ‘unfit for office’—but his struggles with [his great depression] gave him the tools to bind a nation.” Actually the article refers to his struggles with “mental illness.” Ironically, in this, it undermines its central thesis. Lincoln was nothing like Henry. His brain did not create a barrier between him and reality. If anything, his depression made him acutely aware of his human frailties. Having himself experienced emotional pain, he was deeply aware of others’ pains and compassionate in his efforts to serve the greater good. As importantly, it is doubtful that Lincoln’s melancholy resulted from a genetic malady. Those who are familiar with his passionate struggles with an insensitive father and the early loss of a loving mother will recognize the socialization difficulties that created role, rank, and relationship dysfunctions. Lincoln, to his credit, struggled to overcome these—and to a large degree
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succeeded. As will shortly become evident, his depression was probably part of the process of moving forward. Sadness is crucial to resocialization in that it cuts a person’s ties to personal losses. This is almost surely what Lincoln was doing—namely cutting his attachments to intimate losses. In all likelihood, this was also what Winston Churchill was doing when in the throes of his “black dog.” Churchill, like Lincoln, has been labeled mentally ill because he suffered from periodic depressions. Throughout his adult life he occasionally descended into gloomy moods that temporarily left him immobilized. The operative word here is “temporarily,” for, as most people know, time and again he emerged from these funks to fight more courageously than ever for the good of humankind. Could it be that these periods of retreat prepared him for the exertions to come? Could it be that they made him stronger? Certainly, like Lincoln, he endured a childhood that was often loveless. Could it be that this imposed role, rank, and relationship losses that he had to overcome before moving forward?

The point of this digression is not merely to salvage the reputation of two distinguished statesmen. The real objective is to take note of the damage done by the medical model. Treating people suffering from role, rank, and relationship problems as if they were mentally defective frequently prevents them from extricating themselves from their dilemmas. It persuades them that there is something wrong that can only be corrected by medical protocols. Consider what it means to be ill. Consider also what it entails to go to a physician for a cure. To begin with, it involves admitting that there is a physiological problem over which one has no control. It then requires ceding authority over this difficulty to a professional expert. The doctor is presumably the one who must diagnose the source of the malady and then prescribe a course of treatment. The patient
is relatively passive. He or she describes the symptoms, submits to a detailed examination, then follows the recommendations of the professional. Sociologists have described this as a “sick role.” When ill, a person is allowed a social time-out. He or she is excused from normal duties in order to permit a period of recuperation. The idea is for the patient to do nothing other than allow the doctor’s prescriptions to restore his health. Such activity as is permitted involves abiding by orders rather than initiating independent correctives.

All of this works tolerably well when dealing with genuine medical conditions. In these cases the physician in a specialized expert whose ministrations are conducive to a cure. The medications prescribed, the operations performed, and the scientific diagnostics carried out are beyond the scope of most laypersons. To refuse to cooperate in them is, therefore, to invite disaster. To go further and assert that one possesses an authority superior to the physician’s is tantamount to a death wish. Yet all of this is diametrically opposed to what should happen when confronting role, rank, and relationship problems. The depression, anxiety, and anger of hitting the wall are not overcome by meekly swallowing pills prescribed by a psychiatrist. Nor are they surmounted by going into psychotherapy with the attitude that the work is going to be done by the therapist. A conviction that it is essentially the therapist’s job to offer interpretations and the clients to accept them is self-defeating. Resocialization is not a passive activity. It is not something done to people, but something they must do for themselves. If they wait around to be saved, they will not be. If they only seek answers from the outside, these will never come. Nor should resocialization be regarded as a mystery the way that psychotherapy often is. The client must him/herself become an
expert in understanding the process if it is to arrive at a positive conclusion. He or she cannot depend on a therapist to call all the shots, but must navigate the process with eyes wide open. Finally, resocialization is intensely emotional. A person undergoing it must feel his or her own feelings. Merely going through the motions at the direction of an outsider will have no effect whatsoever.

Perhaps most detrimental to resocialization is the notion that hitting the social mobility wall is evidence of a personal defect. When anxiety and depression are considered mental disorders rather than an aspect of breaking free from role, rank, and relationship problems, the implication is that one must admit to being damaged goods before seeking relief. Instead of interpreting one’s difficulties in achieving success as emanating from coercive socialization, they are attributed to a quasi-physiological shortcoming. This has the effect of discouraging people from breaking free of their limitations. They prefer to muddle along as best they can rather than acknowledge weaknesses that others might interpret as a license to attack. To publicly admit to personal frailties is virtually to advertise an inability to win tests of strength. It is to invite defeat in a world where competition is rampant. As unhelpfully, such an admission may convince a person that he or she is too defective to win. To say out loud that one is mentally ill reinforces a reputation for weakness that can provoke exploitation and self-doubts. Rather than facilitate social success, this does the opposite. As a result, sensible people, people who are not crazy, are loath to seek psychotherapy. They do not want to submit to a procedure that in the very act of requesting it undermines their motives for enduring it.
Resocialization, as opposed to psychotherapy, is for normal people. It does not seek to effect a cure because it does not assume it is addressing a mental illness. Resocialization helps people who are already reasonably strong to get stronger. It invites them to engage in a process that will enable them to relinquish attachments to the beliefs, emotions, and personalized norms and values that are holding them back. It encourages them to demolish the shackles thrust upon them while they were young. Resocialization, if it is to become a widespread tool for facilitating personal professionalization, cannot be viewed as exceptional intervention appropriate only for the mentally impaired. Resorting to it cannot be an admission of a congenital weakness; it cannot be an indicator of inevitable failure. Resocialization ought to be regarded as a normal tool in aspiring to individual success. It should to be thought of as something any sensible person would have the courage to enter. Personal growth must not be an occasion for shame. In is middle class world dependent upon decentralized decision-making; it needs to be a routine means of achieving the freedom to become self-directed.

Nowadays, of course, much of what is labeled psychotherapy is performed by social workers. Largely for financial reasons, psychiatrists have been consigned to diagnostic and prescription services. They may supervise social workers, but in their day-to-day interventions are essentially pill-pushers. Social workers, however, have their own therapeutic handicap to overcome. Their profession began by trying to alleviate the indignities of poverty. The clients who sought their assistance were not mentally ill, but did suffer from being at the bottom of the social pyramid. Many of them lived in slums, imbibed too much alcohol, and resorted to crime when the opportunity arose. To seek out social work support was therefore to admit to being a social loser. It was to advertise
that one was too feeble to solve one’s problems independently. It was to declare that one
needed charity. Needless to say, this was as much an admission of relative weakness as
is an acknowledgement of mental illness. Hence it too would make success less possible
in the very act of pursuing it. Here then is another reason for recognizing resocialization
as a separate process. There should be no need for people in quest of middle class
success to be stigmatized because their early socialization makes it necessary to
relinquish dysfunctional roles, ranks, and relationships.

**Resocialization**

All right then, what is resocialization? What is it that a person who has hit the
social mobility wall has to do in order to be free to move forward? What will enable him
or her to create a separation from the past so as to make better, more professionalized,
choices about selecting an occupation, competing for leadership responsibilities, courting
an appropriate partner, and raising self-directed children? If the truth be told, the steps
needed to let go of debilitating losses are simple to enumerate, albeit difficult to undergo.
They are not so complex that only mental giants can comprehend them, yet they may
seem impassable because they are so excruciating. Resocialization is often resisted, and
an understanding of its phases repressed, because they are inherently painful. These
stages inevitably entail experiencing emotions that any sane person would prefer to
sidestep. Anger, fear, and sadness are at the very heart of resocialization; and not just
anger, fear, and sadness, but intense anger, intense fear, and intense sadness. Since most
people hate to experience these feelings, it should be obvious that under ordinary
circumstances they will avoid their more potent incarnations.
Resocialization begins with a person re-experiencing the problems that are holding him or her back. The false beliefs, intense emotions, and ineffective volitional commitments that keep a person tied to dysfunctional roles, inferior ranks, and debilitating relationships must come back to consciousness if they are to be processed for change. These experiences have usually been thrust deep into the underside of an individual’s psyche because they are distressing. A way must therefore be unearthed to allow them to return to the surface in all their gory details. Freud thought he could achieve this first through hypnosis, later through dream analysis, and finally via an uncensored stream of free association. But it can also be accomplished by consciously allowing oneself to drift back to past states of awareness. When Freud began to explore the nature of psychoanalysis, he assumed that intellectually identifying what went wrong would be sufficient to bring relief. He conjectured that a knowledge of the experiences that caused his patients distress would liberate them from archaic demons. If, for instance, a client recognized that he had been terrified by accidentally observing his parents having sex, this alone would make the recollection of the incident less terrifying. What Freud called “the primal scene” would lose its power to inflame once it was realized that one’s father was not attacking one’s mother; that theirs had been an act of love, not aggression. Unfortunately, it soon became clear that this stratagem did not work. Information, by itself, made little difference to a client’s condition. The misery did not disappear upon achieving enlightenment.

Freud’s colleague, Franz Alexander, put what was actually needed fairly succinctly. Clients, he said, had to undergo a “corrective emotional experience.” They had to feel what went wrong, not merely identify it cognitively. If they were to alter the
way they reacted, they had to reorganize their affective responses. Fortunately for resocialization, most people are impelled to re-experience past failures. Another of Freud's observations was that his patients suffered from a repetition compulsion. However articulately he explained the source of their distress, they seemed hell-bent on recapitulating bygone tragedies. A woman who had an abusive father might thus seek relationships with abusive men. Although she intellectually recognized that her parent had been a sadistic tyrant, she was nevertheless compelled to fall in love with someone equally sadistic. For reasons she could not fathom, it was these men she found attractive. Even though this tendency seemed bizarre, it turned out to reflect a need to re-experience archaic emotions. If a person was going to undergo what went wrong, she might have to place herself in a situation similar to the socialization difficulties that initiated her problems. This would re-arouse long gone responses, not from a masochistic desire to re-endure their worst aspects, but rather from a desire to correct what went wrong. The repetition compulsion brought the past back, not for its own sake, but so that it could be emotionally reworked.

Once the past returned, that is, once a person was in the midst of what seemed to be either the coercive role negotiations of a bygone era, the tests of strength that imposed an inferior status, or the exploitive intimate attachments that betokened a subsequent betrayal, he or she would be free to enter the second phase of resocialization. This next stage is characterized by protest. That which went wrong is not, upon its return, calmly endured; it is actively resisted. When children are forced into dysfunctional roles, inferior ranks, or defective relationships, they do not passively submit. They do not embrace the idea of being a scapegoat, a social loser, or a social isolate. Others who were
too powerful to defeat impose these conditions upon them. In short, each of these
represents a loss. When they formerly occurred, they were unwanted, but could not be
prevented. The reason they could not was obviously that the person was young and
relatively powerless. Now as an adult, he or she will want to reverse the verdict of
history. The individual will still feel impelled to resist, but this time will desire victory
where winning was previously impossible. The objective is to turn back the blame that
was once coercively imposed, to come out ahead in a test of strength by being stronger
than a former adversary, and/or to evade intimate bonds that proved undependable.

None of this, however, is dispassionately achieved. Intense emotions bubble to
the surface in an effort to achieve victory. First of all, there will be anger. The
frustrations caused by losing arouse a desire to get even. Resisting unwanted outcomes is
not an intellectual exercise. They are hated and therefore call forth a desire to return
force with force. So powerful will these impulses be that they may tip over into rage.
Should this occur, recapitulating the past can result in renewed losses. Rage, being
stupid, usually induces ineffective tactics. In this case, ancient losses are replaced by
something equally unwelcome. Successful resocialization is therefore contingent upon
achieving sufficient emotional control to keep from doing something foolish. To make
matters worse, intermixed with the anger will, in all likelihood, be fear. This may come
disguised as anxiety, that is, as a fear whose source is difficult to identify. But it will be
fear nevertheless. In re-animating old fights, a person may not be able to circumvent re-
experiencing specters of old losses. He or she will thus dread additional defeats. Indeed,
there will be the added fear that one’s anger may invite retaliation from an opponent who
does not want to lose either. Fear, may thus tip over into terror and terror, like rage,
being stupid can also induce futile efforts at victory. Successful resocialization is therefore contingent upon achieving sufficient control of one’s fears to keep from doing something counterproductive. The protest phase of resocialization is consequently more about achieving emotional maturity than reversing past setbacks. It is about re-encountering old emotions as an adult so as to learn how to control them.

In fact, achieving emotional maturity may enable a person to perceive that victory in long lost battles is not possible. In most cases, old losses cannot be converted into present day successes because what happened in the past happened then, not now. The dysfunctional roles, inferior ranks, and unreliable relationships of yesteryear cannot be undone by present events. No matter how much they hurt, or unjust they were, the clock cannot be turned back. Even sincere apologies from repentant role partners cannot erase ancient reverses. It is this awareness that initiates the third phase of resocialization. This is the stage during which one must let go of the past. It is the stage during which a person undergoes a significant depression. Sadness is an awful feeling. It is a sentiment few people voluntarily adopt. Yet sadness is the mechanism that tears powerful attachments asunder. In the case of death, sorrow allows us to reorganize our priorities so that the bonds of courtship, for instance, can be set aside. Someone who had been integrated into our lives is thereby disengaged from our current plans and future prospects. We mourn our loved ones when they die; we even mourn them when we divorce. The same process, however, occurs with dysfunctional roles. They too must be mourned in order to be set aside, for if they are not, they will continue to shape current activities. The depression that is at the core of resocialization allows a person to reorganize his or her scripts so that it is possible to separate from debilitating behaviors.
A deep sadness permits a person to review the beliefs, intense emotions, and norms and values that sustained unsatisfying behaviors. That which was internalized is rethought until it is plain that outworn beliefs, emotions, and volitions can be released; that they do not have to remain part of someone’s repertoire in order to sustain a rewarding life. Dysfunctional scripts can be expelled to make room for more productive internalizations. The same is true of reputations for weakness. Sadness can permit an individual to relinquish this sort of self-image to make space to be a winner.

The depression at the center of resocialization can be as frightening as the emotional storms of the protest phase. This feeling can be so intense that it seems the equivalent to death. No wonder that it has often been interpreted as a mental disorder. No wonder that many people prefer that it be completely expunged. But for most of us depression is not fatal, that is, as long as suicide is guarded against. In fact, suicide becomes less likely when it is understood that depression is usually self-limiting. The sadness of grief can feel as if it will intensify until it is unsustainable, but as long as a person proceeds slowly and cautiously it eventually turns around and permits a semblance of normality. That which is lost may not completely disappear, but it loses its power to interfere with intelligent decision-making. There may be a lingering sense of regret, but this does not have to prevent success or personal happiness.

The last phase of resocialization is renegotiating better roles, ranks, and relationships. Getting rid of what held a person back is only half the battle. Unless this is replaced by improved roles, ranks, and relationships, nothing fundamental will have changed. Fortunately, when that which had been preventing self-direction is deleted from the psyche, the now adult can engage in role negotiations, tests of strength, and bonding
processes that allow for more successful outcomes. A self-motivated expertise in living cannot come into being as long as a person is recycling past defeats. Once these are cleared away, he or she can begin engaging in dual concern negotiations based on a give and take that permit bargains in which both sides emerge as winners. An individual can thereby reconstruct more satisfying personal roles. He or she can also assert personal powers more effectively. Subsequent to letting go of ancient losses, the now liberated person can seek hierarchical advancements based on a clearheaded evaluation of what is needed to win. This does not mean that all tests of strength will result in victories, but that in better assessing and applying one’s powers, one is more likely to come out ahead. Similarly, in severing attachments to unreliable others, it becomes possible to assess who may be a more reliable partner. Courtships based on reality, not fantasy, are thus more probable. In other words, resocialization releases a person to do better socially. It does not dictate good choices, but it clears away the underbrush so that these become more feasible.

This then is the general outline of resocialization. There are only four steps, and none of them is beyond comprehension. The process is not rocket science, but each step is difficult to attain. They are painful and demand enormous effort. Moreover, they may take years to work through. Re-experiencing the past involves time, as does protesting old losses, mourning what is beyond recovery, or renegotiating better relationships. Resocialization is not an instant solution. It is not a magic pill that cures every ill. Nevertheless, for many people it is the sovereign road to successful autonomy. It removes the barriers imposed by a coercive, conformity-inducing socialization. By
separating individuals from a dysfunctional past, it frees them to become their own people and therefore to become self-directed experts—if they so choose.

Psychotherapy, which is the closest the medical model comes to resocialization, presumes that an authoritative helper is necessary to facilitate a cure. Resocialization makes no such assumption. A professional who acts as a guide and a source of security can indeed help in navigating the process. This assistance can, in fact, be useful in avoiding the worst pitfalls of the procedure. Then again, much resocialization is accomplished ad hoc. People often go through its re-experiencing, protest, letting go, and renegotiation phases without realizing that they are doing so. Resocialization is a normal human phenomenon. It is part of our natural equipment for separating ourselves from personal failures. Neither Sigmund Freud, nor any other medical guru, invented the formula. Nevertheless completing it successfully can benefit from a conscious awareness of what is involved. Would-be middle class leaders can become expert in its elements if they desire. They can, with a little effort, become personally acquainted with its various aspects and professionalized in its application. Indeed, this will enable them to make independent decisions regarding how to proceed in utilizing it. For many, this means that resocialization can be tackled piecemeal. Rather than be overwhelmed by its demands, they can engage in relinquishing past defeats incrementally, that is to say, as they become emotionally ready to tackle them. They will find that becoming their own persons is not something they have to do all at once, but only as their personal inclinations, and the available resources, allow. Should they so chose, however, they will find that they can be more successful than they previously thought.
Winning by Losing

My father believed in winning. He was a very competitive man who never wanted to lose. But Dad was not a subtle man. He believed that if one were confronted with an obstacle, the best policy was to attack it head on. If a door were closed, the idea was to break it down. Like John Wayne, he also believed that apologizing was the equivalent of admitting a weakness. It was something a real man never did. Nor did he have to, for a real man was always strong. At the very least, he always appeared to be strong. Moreover, he never made mistakes. At no point did he confront a task that he could not master instantly and completely. As such, a real man never needed resocialization. This sort of man would not have allowed himself to be trapped in dysfunctional roles, inferior ranks, or debilitating relationships. Even as a child, he would have known better. As a result, real men never lost. They were not defeated for any reason. It would, therefore, be unthinkable to them that, in order to win, they might have to allow themselves to be beaten. Yet that, in essence, is what resocialization is about.

When I was an undergraduate studying psychology, a professor explained that sometimes in order to reach a goal a person has to move away from it. The example he used was that of sitting down in a chair. To sit in a chair you first have to turn away from it. You must remove the object from your field of vision so that you can position your derriere correctly. This phenomenon turns out to be fairly common. Contrary to my father, a direct assault does not always provide the winning stratagem. In fact, it often results in lethal confrontations. So it is with resocialization. The process is a classic example of advancing by first retreating. Resocialization depends on winning by losing.
People who are held back by dysfunctional roles, ranks, and relationships are not always well served by attempting to rout past bugaboos. If they are intent on winning the unwinnable, they may expend many years in vain effort. Some battles cannot be won; hence an unswerving obstinacy in pursuit of victory can be misguided. Successful businesspersons know that the time often comes to cut one’s losses. Sinking additional capital into a lost cause because one has already invested a great deal may feel necessary, but it is not rational. One has to start from where one is and calculate what is most likely to pay off down the road.

Deciding to undergo resocialization almost always feels like a defeat. It seems as if one is giving up. Those socialization agents (probably Mom and Dad) who forced dysfunctional roles, ranks, and relationships upon a person will appear to have won. Their unwarranted impositions will seem to have prevailed. When we were children, many of us secretly imagined that we would be able to reverse these injustices when we grew up. Committing to resocialization is apparently an admission that one will never be able to do so. But this is true only as long as it is also assumed that the direct assault is the only way to triumph. It leaves out the tactic of winning by moving away from the goal. Resocialization may feel like surrender, but it is not. What it is, is a mechanism from disengaging from an untenable battlefield. Victorious generals know that you do not always fight the enemy where you find him. You commit to battle where you have the advantages, not where the enemy does. Sometimes this means not fighting some fights at all. Successful tacticians understand that winners choose their confrontations with care. They do not automatically react when they are challenged. Successful warriors have sufficient self-control to plan where they will attack and then the mental
and emotional coolness to execute these plans with intelligence and flexibility. This is what resocialization allows a person who has hit the social mobility wall to do. It separates a person from the mental and emotional confusions of being entangled in long ago setbacks.

As may be recalled, back in chapter 3 it was emphasized that people who move on up must sometimes separate from their past. My grandparents crossed an ocean, Zell Miller moved out of his beloved mountains, and Miriam extricated herself from a pernicious cult. Each was said to have undergone a sort of rite of passage before success became possible. Only the fictional Jeffersons were able to move up without undergoing a significant process of emotional growth. Resocialization is this sort of rite of passage. It is a more extreme form of separation than Miller endured, but it may be what is required for those who are profoundly stuck in a dysfunctional childhood. Resocialization is admittedly a drastic solution, yet it may be the only solution appropriate to a person’s needs. Intentionally inviting a loss may not seem to make sense, but losing may be the only way to cut one’s ties to internalized failures. Losing, more particularly, cutting one’s ties to aborted roles, ranks, and relationships by way of a period of profound sadness, is not a defeat in the sense of being a total submission. It is actually a way station along a revised route to victory. Resocialization, when it is successfully achieved, builds a solid foundation for success where none previously existed. It allows for renewed role negotiations, reinvigorated tests of strength, and more realistic interpersonal alliances. Sometimes people fear that in separating from their childhood selves they are being disloyal to their families of origin. They worry that to succeed they must betray people who loved them and whom they feel duty bound to love
and respect in return. This is partly true. They are betraying those aspects of a socialization that sabotaged their life chances. But they need not disavow the best aspects of their former lives, if they do not want to. They can still love their parents and respect their heritage, without having to conform to demands no longer in their interest. Like Miller, they can leave their beloved mountains without renouncing an affection for their majestic heights.

When resocialization is necessary, but does not occur, the consequences can be tragic. John’s fate is an object lesson in what is possible when a person is in too much pain to separate from a coercive childhood. His inability to come to terms with his father resulted in a fatal effort at escape. John never realized that he did not need his father’s permission to move forward with an independent existence. He thought that in order to undo his past he required his father’s cooperation. What he never permitted himself to learn is that resocialization might have enabled him to grieve his father’s tyrannical ways without journeying to Florida. He could have stayed at home, and with the assistance of a resocialization agent, re-experienced the injustices he once endured. He could then have angrily, but indirectly, remonstrated with his absent parent, and subsequently endured a period of mourning the supportive childhood he was never permitted to enjoy. Eventually he would have been able to work out new roles and relationships with his girlfriend and their never-to-be-born child. This would have taken time, probably many years, but the endpoint would have been more satisfactory. John would not have needed to betray himself, or his girlfriend, in order to move forward. He would not even have needed to betray his father. Paradoxically, in allowing himself to renegotiate the kind of parental role he was denied, he would have symbolically expressed love for his
intransigent parent. This would have made him, and those he associated with, winners. He would have lost on one front, but won on another.

Miriam, of course, did much better. She did not enter therapy in order to engage in resocialization, yet she found another means of achieving comparable results. Miriam allowed herself to experience many of the shortcomings of her childhood by entering what amounted to a surrogate family. The Children of God recapitulated many of the features of her actual family. While a member, she could re-experience much of what she endured when younger. She could also get to the point where a protest became necessary. As an adult, Miriam came to appreciate the unethical aspects of her pseudo-family, then effectively resisted these. In her actual childhood, this was not possible, but now, as an adult, she could, when push came to shove, protect herself. All of this, it should be apparent, entailed substantial emotional strain. By her own testimony, Miriam was disoriented when she found herself out on her own. Her liberation initially also included periods of cathartic depression. Of course, since she was by this time a mother, she had to mourn her past catch-as-catch-can. The demands on her did not allow a withdrawal into an extended period of grief. In any event, what she was able to accomplish enabled her to renegotiate her status. She moved farther along the path toward a responsible adulthood than either of her parents, ultimately obtaining a college degree and becoming a respected college professor. No doubt, there is more that she would like to achieve—and probably will—but she has come a far piece through ad hoc resocialization.

As for myself, my resocialization was more formal and more conscious. Unlike John or Miriam, I entered psychotherapy. At the time I did not understand how
resocialization operated, nevertheless its outlines emerged in the doing. My therapist never explained what was supposed to happen, but in retrospect I could perceive the re-experiencing, protest, depression, and renegotiation phases enumerated above. Starting out in complete denial, only slowly did I become aware that my childhood was not a fairytale journey. Only slowly did I come to resent my father’s intransigent demands for conformity or bitterly denounce their effects. It took even longer to experience the depths of my anguish over the lack of freedom I was granted. Yet in time I did feel this grief. It was then that I began to emerge as the person I wanted to become. Only then was I able to separate emotionally from my father and become a different sort of individual. I could now do things like producing this book or marrying a woman who loves me. For me resocialization has indeed been a liberating experience; a way to win by first losing.

Almost as an aside, I must note that resocialization is not the same as education. Education is a cognitive experience; resocialization is an emotional one. Education provides facts; resocialization facilitates an internal emotional reorganization. Going to school can provide invaluable information, but it does not encourage the re-experiencing, protesting, mourning, or renegotiating needed to overcome personal losses. School is much too impersonal. It demands personal control, but not exposure of one’s inner turmoil. Students are expected to pay attention to their lessons and refrain from interfering with the learning of others. They are not supposed to confess their weaknesses aloud. While education is important, it is the antithesis of the personalized emotional storms of resocialization. As such, the two must be distinguished if each is to be accorded the attention that both deserve.
Personal Archaeology Redux

Resocialization has an additional benefit beyond emotional liberation. It can also facilitate introspection and honest expeditions into the unconscious. As has already been explained, self-knowledge is a crucial component of a professionalized self. It is not possible to become a competent decision-maker without first understanding oneself. Nevertheless an accurate understanding does not come cheap. Nearly impenetrable emotional impediments can block the path to personalized wisdom. If someone has endured substantial role, rank, and relationship losses as a child, the pain of these defeats typically prevents their recollection. An important part of the person one has become will have been buried in the unconscious where it is hoped it will do no harm. Sadly, because these memories are painful and the losses they represent so frustrating, they continue to influence a person’s behaviors despite their stupidity. Unconscious motivations are not impotent. Although they go unrecognized, they can be the most important determinants of contemporary roles, ranks, and relationships. The very fact that they are nearly invisible does not reduce their power. If anything, it multiplies their impact. They, as it were, come in under the radar where they cannot be stopped because they are never detected.

Actually, that which is buried in the unconscious often pertains to our most basic roles, ranks, and relationships. The parts we learn to play when we are young typically lay the groundwork for the ones we play later on. They set the patterns that are subsequently repeated and refined. A child who is inducted into a caretaker role by being forced to care for a hypochondriac mother, may, for example, not only come to think of herself as a caretaker, she eventually adopt an assortment of caretaker roles. One day,
despite her personal needs, she may build her life around taking care of her husband, her children, and her friends. So entrenched will these roles be, that she may find it difficult to imagine an alternative. They will seem entirely natural, that is, unless she can piece the repressions that hide their childhood origin. Only in doing this will she understand why she is the way she is, and, not incidentally, that what happened was not inevitable.

Yet breaking through to deeply hidden secrets can be frightening. They are concealed for a reason. The losses involved became losses because a person had been intimidated into submission. Fear is typically essential in inflicting coercive defeats. It is what persuades someone to back down and allow an unfair interlocutor to win in a role negotiation, test of strength, or personal attachment. What is necessary to confronting these reverses is courage. The person needs the intestinal fortitude to experience the fears that were involved without fleeing them. Only this will allow him or her to look them in the face and understand what they were about. As a child, the dangers that needed to be evaded could not have been examined to determine their legitimacy. Children do not possess the experience, the logical tools, or the emotional maturity to make accurate assessments. Adults, in contrast, should boast these resources. They can far more precisely ascertain when a threat is hazardous. If they have the courage to proceed, they may even discover that there was less to fear than originally imagined.

Resocialization can provide this courage. It can make a person’s underlying motives transparent by re-experiencing what was lost, protesting unfair impositions, and mourning what was not possible. Each stage of resocialization contributes something to one’s self-knowledge. Re-experiencing past defeats is all about having the courage to feel them. Happily, in feeling them, they become available to be examined more
carefully. Protesting coercive socialization rejects unjust demands, but in rejecting them their contours are elucidated. More particularly, in developing greater emotional maturity it becomes clearer what was possible and what was not. The sadness of mourning enhances this clarity. In relinquishing attachments to past defeats, it becomes less necessary to forge a victory out of unpromising materials. This means that it is less necessary to fool oneself into believing that the impossible is possible. Once one lets go, one is less frightened that the unattainable will elude one’s grasp. Courage, it must be remembered, is grace under pressure. It is an ability to function even when one is frightened. Resocialization increases a person’s courage by reducing threats and making them less mysterious. A person therefore becomes less frightened and better able to control his or her actions. This will, of course, include an ability to examine previously inaccessible secrets.

As significantly, resocialization makes it possible to evaluate one’s strengths and weaknesses. Because winning, whether vis-à-vis roles, ranks, or relationships, is not always about being the strongest, it is vital to evaluate one’s assets relative to those of potential adversaries. This is not to suggest that resocialization cannot increase an individual’s strengths, for example, by making him or her more emotionally stable. It is to indicate that no one, no matter how blessed, is infinitely strong. No one is ever so potent that he or she can accomplish whatever is desired. There are always limitations that must be recognized if they are to be factored into competent planning. It is therefore important to see these for what they are. Strengths must be understood so as to apply one’s efforts where they can have the greatest effect. Weaknesses must also be understood so that vulnerabilities can be avoided. It is likewise necessary to perceive
how one’s strengths and weaknesses stack up against potential rivals. What will win in one case, may not in another.

Because individuals who have endured a coercive socialization frequently misinterpret their strengths and weakness, they are prone to making mistakes about what they can or cannot do. Having often been convinced that they are weaker than they are, they discount the areas in which they maintain an advantage. Similarly, having endured many losses, they are terrified of acknowledging further limitations. More concerned with how others treated them than with their personal aptitudes, they deny strengths that might have infuriated a former role partner, while hiding weakness that might have invited further exploitation. In the end, they wind up pretending that they do not have abilities they possess and that they do not possess inabilities they have. This can make it difficult to calculate the best way to move ahead. Resocialization cuts through this morass by restarting the clock. In allowing a person to renegotiate dysfunctional roles, ranks, and relationships, it enables him or her to reappraise relative capabilities. The best deals regarding a division of labor, the most appropriate tests of strength, and superior intimate alliances can be sought out on the basis of merit and mutual advantage. Moreover, because victory becomes possible, an honest evaluation one one’s relative status will not prove as painful. When it is possible to obtain something of value, it is less necessary to lust after every potential asset. A self-knowledge that includes an accurate appraisal of one’s limitations will not feel like a sentence to endless failure. To the contrary, it merely shines a light on one’s human fallibilities.
Chapter 10

Middle Class Standards

Who Am I to Judge?

Ours is an age of incomparable sophistication. We are no longer mired in the superstitions of our ancestors. The silly myths that they once believed, myths about dragons threatening damsels in distress and sailing ships falling off the edge of the earth, have been exposed for what they are, while the moralistic yardsticks to which they were committed, taboos, such as a belief in placating the ghosts of dead relatives, have been revealed as primitive inventions. Today moral relativism prevails. It is now understood that every society creates its own moral standards; that what makes sense in one place and time may not in another. As a consequence, that which each community believes to be correct is correct for it. Others who wish to judge are essentially uninformed busybodies. They are sticking their noses in where they don’t belong. The Jonathan Edwards and Cotton Mathers of our past demanded eternal damnation for heretics who did not toe the line of their puritanical ways, but we have a more expansive view. We are not as hidebound because we understand that people differ. Modern worldliness, thanks to a growing cosmopolitanism, demands a tolerance of diversity. To understand all, we have found, is to accept all. It is to realize that when one stands in the other fellow’s shoes, what at first seems misguided, actually makes sense.

Granted, toleration is not universal, but it has gone pretty far. It is true that when Janice Jackson experienced a costume “malfunction” and her right breast was momentarily exposed to a national audience, millions of television viewers were outraged. They complained that this was a violation of standards of decency that ought to
be prohibited by federal authorities. In fact, very little came of this uproar. The level of public undress on network programs diminished almost not at all. One of the reasons for this is that an even larger number of viewers have come to feel that censorship, no matter what its objectives, is unacceptable. Something similar occurred with regard to Janice’s brother Michael. He was accused of nothing less than pedophilia and tried for this crime before a national spotlight. Many observers assumed that he would be convicted of acts he clearly perpetrated, but he was not. Although he admitted to sleeping naked with young boys who were not members of his family, and despite eyewitness testimony that he inappropriately fondled these children, a jury found him not guilty. Whereas panels of citizens in the past would have been scandalized, these jurors decided that there was insufficient evidence to convict. Although several later explained that they believed he had molested these juveniles, they were not so indignant as to believe that he needed imprisonment. Long indoctrinated in the tenets of civil toleration, they were prepared to live and let live. Eventually many of us would even celebrate Michael’s death as if it were that of a saint.

Perhaps an even more egregious illustration of contemporary non-judgmentalism is the saga of Bill Clinton. Accused before the world of having engaged in sexual acts with a White House intern, of having groped a woman in quest of a political favor, and, much earlier, of having raped a nursing home owner, the public shrugged when he was brought before the bar of justice in the U.S. Senate. Impeached by a committee of the House of Representatives for high crimes and misdemeanors, the senators called not a single witness to testify to his alleged misdeeds. Convinced that their constituents did not want the chief executive removed from office, they sought a hasty an exit from this
imbroglio. They were willing to agree with a chorus of Clinton defenders that there were no high crimes and misdemeanors; that what the president had done was something anyone in his place might have done. As was endlessly reiterated: Everyone lies, everyone cheats. To lie about a sexual infidelity, even in the public arena, was what any normal man would do. If there was a price to be paid, it was between Bill and his wife Hillary. Because sex was a private matter, no one but she had the right to condemn his indiscretion. As long as she found it acceptable, others should as well. Nor did this tolerance disqualify her for the senate or secretary of state.

What made this denouement so egregious was its reverberations. The notion that everyone lies and everyone cheats became the accepted wisdom in many quarters. Public toleration of these behaviors persuaded millions of young people that they were unexceptional. To this day, many of my students piously intone the canard that everyone lies and everyone cheats. They believe that they are being principled in insisting that Clinton was not the only president who cheated on his wife. They assume that it is simple honesty to assert that every important man has mistresses. Even when they are confronted with a review of presidential histories to the contrary, they stand their ground. Once it is noted that the Bushes, Reagan, Carter, Ford, and Nixon were all faithful to their wives, they indignantly retort that no one could possibly know this. Prepared to defame a host of leaders rather than admit their open-mindedness might be misplaced, they reject evidence of sexual loyalty or personal honesty. This is especially so among students coming from working class or African-American backgrounds. Acutely vulnerable to media-derived accounts, their personal experience has not yet introduced them to the value of fidelity or integrity. Worse still, given their beliefs, many will be led into
lifestyles from whence they will never learn the opposite lessons and from which they may never extricate themselves.

In recent years, a trendy public service advertisement has encapsulated this error. The television commercial advises viewers that unless they are wearing a black robe and wielding a gavel they have no right to judge others. Presumably the only persons qualified to pass judgment are professional jurists. Only they have the social mandate to rule on the guilt of malefactors. This, however, is not only wrong; it is insane. Were this taken literally and ordinary people refrained from judging others, morality would cease to exist. Morality is all about judging. It is about deciding that some behaviors are acceptable, whereas others are not. Moreover, morality is about enforcing these judgments. It imposes a variety of sanctions, depending upon which rule has been abrogated. Constructive conduct is positively sanctioned, while harmful conduct is negatively sanctioned. Those who break important moral regulations are, in fact, likely to be harshly punished. Their behavior is not tolerated because tolerance is somehow declared to be a universal obligation. To tolerate everything would be to abide some truly awful conduct. It would convert tolerance into a farce and transform human society into a shambles. Were it to become the norm, Hobbes’ war of all against all would arise in real life.

Consider what the world would be like if people were to ask themselves: Who am I to judge another when he or she lies? Who am I to judge someone who stabs me with a knife? Who am I to judge the felon who rapes my teenage daughter? Who am I to judge when the Nazis torture and murder millions of innocents? Who am I to judge politicians caught stealing taxpayer dollars? Who am I to judge when Africans are enslaved and
worked to death on New World plantations? Who am I to judge religions that endorse cannibalism? Who am I to judge when children are abused and beaten to a pulp by parents high on cocaine? If people cannot make render verdicts about these, what can they judge? If they have to await legal procedures before condemning such actions, how could they protect themselves from day-to-day violations of their rights? In fact, they could not. If ordinary people had to accept whatever transpired, few bad guys would be dissuaded from doing their worst. If it were impermissible to get irritated when someone engages in sadistic violence, sadistic violence would be rampant.

Fortunately, in the real world, ordinary people do not heed the counsels of ethical relativism. They do not believe it is their duty to offer unconditional positive regard under every circumstance. In their daily lives, they set many of conditions. Indeed, they set a multitude of moral conditions. They are committed to a host of ethical rules and values, which if violated, elicit negative responses. Common sense dictates that treating all forms of conduct as equivalent regards them as equal. It indicates that what others do is a matter of indifference; hence anything is acceptable. This is something few people are willing to countenance. They do, in fact, find a host of behaviors deplorable. They become indignant about lying, stealing, and murder. They hate broken promises, personal betrayals, and casual cheating. More than this, they demand that punishments be imposed for these infringements. They do not wait for police officers to arrive before informing their friends and relatives when someone has gone over the line. Were they not to do so, were they to depend upon formal institutions to enforce every standard, there would never be enough control agents to do the job. No society ever has the
manpower to post an authorized adjudicator wherever children gather to play or
whenever spouses decide to negotiate marital roles.

Every society and virtually all of the members of every society set limits on the
cost that is tolerated. Were social beings permitted complete spontaneity, their
competing interests would continuously erupt into dangerous conflicts. People would
regularly find themselves on opposite sides of important issues. If these clashes were
totally unregulated, death and destruction would ensue. The whole point of morality is to
moderate potential quarrels. Agreed upon standards, whether in the form of rules or
values, attempt to harmonize divergent goals. While they prevent people from obtaining
everything they want, in moderating personal differences, they also permit them to get
more than they would under conditions of perpetual strife. Morality, as it were, imposes
a semi-armed truce. People do not completely give up the option of inflicting pain on
those who frustrate them, but their shared covenants limit this prerogative. Only for
certain infringements, and only in specified manners, are they authorized to express
extreme displeasure.

Not only does morality set limits that moderate interpersonal conflicts, but it
internalizes these limitations. In growing up, people learn what is expected of them and
are instructed on how to participate in enforcing these yardsticks. They then commit
themselves to these and make them their own. Consequently, in most cases people do not
require official moralists to inform them of their obligations. No doubt, their friends and
neighbors will remind them of what is right or wrong—as will their priests and
politicians—nevertheless most possess a reasonably functional moral compass. Their
consciences usually inform them about what is appropriate. This enables them to arrive
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at socially approved judgments. Tutored in these since they were small, they understand what is required. For them, these are not merely intellectual commitments, but emotional ones. What they believe is good or bad, and right or wrong, more or less aligns with what most others in their community agree is good or bad, and right or wrong. Their own impulses conform with the impulses of their fellows such that they, in concert, enforce approximately the same standards. They subsist as members of a relatively smooth functioning society, not because a Leviathan imposes uniformity, but because they have been socialized in a moral consensus that has slowly emerged to regulate the conflicts endemic to their circumstances.

Which brings us to the state of affairs in a modern middle class society. Our current superstition-free sophistication is a consequence of generations of moral evolution. We are tolerant in ways our ancestors were not because tolerance has developed in tandem with modernity. The cosmopolitan techno-commercial society in which we are immersed could not operate were we to be as narrow-minded as the New England divines of three centuries ago. The absolute moral standards in which they indulged are not our standards. We would never think of burning old women at the stake for the sin of consorting with the devil. Not only are our beliefs different, but as per the relativists, they demonstrate that morality is not absolute. The enterprise’s rules and values are not unchanging guideposts. What people believe to be moral changes as conditions change. Even so, this does not validate ethical relativism. What is good or bad is not a matter of unconstrained opinions. Neither individuals nor communities can define moral rules however they want. The consensus to which they commit is something that emerges from extensive social negotiations. No individual, no matter how
enlightened, has total control over this. Nor can the community, through some mysterious act of general will, go wherever it wishes. What is eventually deemed moral is constrained by the intersecting needs of its constituents. Its history, environment, technology, as well as current institutions, in conjunction with human nature, impel its members in some directions rather than others. The questions that thus emerge are these: In which directions have we, in our emerging middle class society, been impelled? And, What moral rules and values have proved appropriate to a professionalized, techno-commercial civilization? Furthermore, which rules and values are professionalized selves in the process of internalizing? These are not academic issues. Some standards will prove workable, whereas others will not. Some facilitate competent, self-directed, decision-making and others do not.

**Trust**

Some weeks ago I witnessed a phenomenon that would at first blush seem to contradict the cynicism of my students. It must be remembered that not only do many insist that everyone lies and cheats; they also claim that this is the way it has always been. From this, one might suppose from this that they distrusted their classmates. Yet this is not so. When I attempt to provoke suspicions by telling them that the registrar has informed me one of their number is a serial killer, scarcely a feather is ruffled. They do not look around apprehensively wondering who the culprit might be. No, they disbelieve me. They cannot imagine that an actual murderer is loose among them. This, to be sure, is a scholastic exercise. They realize that I am teasing.

Nevertheless, several years ago a genuine test of interpersonal trust was arranged by hurricane Katrina and more recently by the Haitian earthquake. Several days after the
storm devastated New Orleans, one of the students approached me to ask if he could collect contributions for a relief fund. He belonged to a campus fraternity that hoped to donate a gift to the Red Cross. Once I gave him permission, he made a plea for assistance and then passed around a large glass jar for donations. In short order, the vessel was filled to over-flowing with paper money, mostly five dollar bills and higher. Here then were students parting with their hard-won funds on the say-so of a stranger. Most did not know the student soliciting their help. They simply trusted his word. Even though they were aware of the existence of con men, they surmised that he was not one of them. Despite their cynicism, their reaction was to take him at face value. They were equally generous towards the victims of the Asian tsunami and the plight of distressed Haitians. Here to they gave without undue suspicions.

This sort of trust is both normal and essential in a Gesellschaft society. If millions of people are to live in harmony, they must assume that the intensions of most others are benign. Were they like the inhabitants of New Guinea several decades ago, they would be so wary of strangers as to kill them on sight. Each small community would keep to the equivalent of an isolated mountain valley, establishing few contacts with outsiders. But this is not the way it is. Nor is it the way it has been for a long time. In Western society, these sorts of barrier have been eroding for millennia. Even the Bible encourages a trust of foreigners. Many biblical scholars have come to believe that this is the true moral of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Whereas it was once thought that the two towns were destroyed because their citizens indulged in sexual perversions, it is presently believed that they were punished for a lack of hospitality. Their sin was turning away
guests without providing a warm reception. In other words, the Lord himself ordained that strangers be given the benefit of the doubt and treated with deference.

Obviously ours is an even larger and more closely integrated society than that of the ancient Middle East. We inhabit a mass society in which we not only accept the presence of strangers; it is one where we depend upon them for essential needs. To begin with, farmers we never meet produce the food on our tables. Likewise, carpenters who remain anonymous erect the roofs under which we shelter. Lastly, the clothes covering our nakedness are designed and fabricated by hands that never touch our own. So familiar is this that we do not give it a second thought. Yet this dependence is grounded in trust. We take it for granted that the farmers will not poison the produce they send to market. We are similarly in convinced that they will continue to till the soil and not take off on a collective vacation. Nor are we anxiety-ridden about the quality of our abodes. Although we may believe today’s construction workers are not as dedicated to their trades as their predecessors, we still rely on their skills to keep us warm and dry. Even the clothing industry elicits confidence. We may check the fabrics we purchase, but when we do, we are unlikely to be disappointed. The styles change, yet the colors stay fast, the seams hold together, and the materials remain intact.

Critics of the current state of affairs maintain that capitalism undermines interpersonal trust. They say that greedy entrepreneurs seek ways to get by with whatever will earn a profit. If they can persuade us—perhaps through clever advertising—to purchase a product designed to become obsolete, they will do so. More concerned with selling replacements than fulfilling customer needs, they are adroit manipulators rather than proficient producers. Although business people assure us that
they have our interests at heart, this is a public relations ploy. As long as they can mollify our doubts, they are content to remain dishonest. Ardent materialists, they are more concerned with physical objects than human well-being. The objective is to manufacture and market vast quantities of goods, rather than foster personal happiness. This converts their patrons into commodities manipulated as if they too were interchangeable mechanical parts. Human beings are treated as if they are objects whose sole function is to accumulate other objects. Capitalists are, therefore, neither trusting nor trustworthy. They do not have faith in consumers, viewing them instead as sources of profit to be controlled, rather than individuals to be understood or protected.

Capitalists are also unreliable. Since they will say or do whatever is necessary to keep the revenues flowing, it is foolish to assume that their assurances possess any substance.

In point of fact, this thoroughly misunderstands the market economy. If anything, a commercial society is dependent upon trust. It cannot be composed of a den of thieves, each of whom is dedicated to stealing from the others. Were this so, the suspicions of each would paralyze the functioning of the whole. Opponents of capitalism seem to imagine that petty charlatans, who criss-cross the country selling defective roof repairs to geriatric customers, pervade the marketplace. They assume that each transaction is an isolated event the marginal profit of which needs to be maximized if overall earnings are to be boosted. It never occurs to them that most business success depends on cultivating repeat customers. For them, it is as if buyers do not return to the same supermarket to purchase their next carton of milk. Obviously this is not the case. Competitors who deliver what they promise soon drive out sellers that alienate customers by dishonestly proffering substandard products. Customers are not stupid. They can tell when they have
been cheated. They can also determine when a superior product is available elsewhere. Of course, ordinary people can be fooled. They can be hoodwinked the first time, and even a second time. But as Lincoln opined, it is difficult to fool all of the people all of the time. Sooner or later they catch on and shift their business to higher-quality vendors.

It’s not that appearances don’t matter. It’s not even that advertising cannot create a bandwagon effect. Symbolic manipulations are frequently successful, but this typically occurs when the differences between two products are insignificant. If a pair of aspirin tablets achieves exactly the same results, the one in the fancier package may corner the market. But if one works, whereas the other makes false claims, the first is apt to become dominant. In business, even in a Gesellschaft society, people develop relationships with others upon whom they have learned to depend. Consumers, for instance, develop loyalty to a favorite supermarket. They shop its familiar aisles because they know what to expect. Manufacturers similarly develop allegiances to particular suppliers. They get to understand those with whom they have regular exchanges, and subsequently depend upon them for reliable information and timely deliveries. If this turns out not to be the case, if they are betrayed, they seek new trading partners. The modern world is filled with strangers. Everyone understands this and, therefore, most compensate for it. They realize that it is essential to distinguish between those former strangers who are trustworthy and those who are not.

Even in the street, it is vital to distinguish between responsible strangers and potential felons. This is usually achieved by evaluating how others are dressed, they way they talk, and the manners they display. These may be symbolic, but they signify a commitment to familiar standards. To wear an expensive suit, as bankers often do, is to
proclaim that one is steadfast, if a tad boring. The same person, decked out in torn jeans and festooned with tattoos, screams out that he is a rule-breaker. He communicates a willingness to violate standards that might also be expressed in embezzling funds entrusted to his care. Back out on the street, similar cues suggest that someone is a potential mugger, while another is not. This may sound shallow, but is actually a reliable means of evaluating trustworthiness. Despite periodic uproars about the insecurities of modern life, pedestrians are hardly ever assaulted in the public sphere. Most people respect the rights of others, whether they share public highways or walk municipal sidewalks.

Trust is even more important in private relationships, but once again interpersonal confidence is the norm. Murder rates may be higher than we would like, but they are lower than in preliterate societies. Anthropologists once thought that hunter-gatherers were peaceful primitives. Uncorrupted by civilization, they were presumably updated versions of the noble savages extolled by Rousseau. It took a while to realize that this was wishful thinking. The low population densities of these communities disguised the brutality of their social relations. Sexual jealousies, for instance, often erupted into fatal encounters. Men who poached on the wives of their comrades, generated resentments. This, combined with the fact that everyone was armed and that there was no constabulary to restrain inflamed passions, led to considerable instability. Modern civilizations, in contrast, are much more orderly. Family disputes still get heated, but they are usually tamped down before they get out of hand. Some husbands and wives continue to slaughter each other, but the numbers are down. If anything, the isolated intimacy of the contemporary nuclear family has placed a premium on men and women understanding
each other—and their children. Interpersonal sophistication may not be as inclusive as one might desire, but it is greater than it once was. Because people know more about themselves and others, they are capable of being more prudent than our remote ancestors.

To a large extent, these improvements owe to the evolution of suitable moral standards. People have developed, and internalized, rules and values that control their impulses. Instead of doing whatever they feel like, their emotional and volitional commitments channel them down less treacherous corridors. Despite public proclamations that “if it feels right, one should do it,” this is not how most people operate. If they are attracted to a restaurant chain’s promise that it has “no rules,” it is because they are hemmed in by so many internalized regulations. They may want to break loose and do what they please, but they rarely do. What is more, this is a good thing. Where they to behave like unruly children, they would step on each other’s toes with alarming regularity. The very density of contemporary societies dictates a consideration for the interests of others. People must possess a sense of what conduct is likely to arouse antipathy. They have to predict when others, including strangers, might retaliate against unwelcome initiatives. Much of this information is provided by morality. The behaviors it proscribes are precisely those apt to elicit revenge. In learning what not to do, people thereby learn how to get along with others. Their shared principles reduce the potential for interpersonal conflict. As a result, they can trust one another. Moreover, because morality is internalized, it reliably prevents dangerous performances. The parties need not constantly be on guard. The standards to which most have become committed are precisely those needed to inhibit appealing mischief. They are what they are because they evolved to restrain common infringements. They fit the
needs of contemporary social arrangements because they developed to cheek by jowl with them.

Professional authority provides another kind of trust. People allow strangers to provide vital services because they can rely on their self-motivated expertise. They bestow leadership based upon symbolic indications that they occupy professional roles. Thus, a medical degree hanging on the wall makes is more likely that a patient will follow a physician’s directives. A belief that this particular professional knows what he or she is doing is one reason for compliance. Another is professional ethics. Physicians, but also attorneys and college professors, are expected to exhibit an allegiance to specialized forms of occupational morality. Having assumed stations of trust, they are believed to have sworn an oath to uphold professional standards. Although many of these provisions are honored in the breach, they are usually taken seriously. Most doctors do not intentionally harm their patients. They would be horrified at the suggestion that they prescribe a drug irrespective of its life-threatening side effects merely because this was profitable. Most are personally committed to improving their patients’ health. This is a standard they have internalized. So well has it been implanted by a professional socialization that patients routinely bestow confidence upon them. Were this not true, doctors would have little influence.

When morality does not restrain primitive impulses, the results can be disastrous. It may be politically incorrect to say this, but one of the reasons so many of my African-American students are prepared to believe everyone lies and cheats is that sexual infidelity is rampant within their communities. Black males have been found to be twice as likely to cheat on their women as other men. This, in turn, is apparently related to the
attitudes of distrust that pervade heterosexual relationships within the black community. African-American women have come to expect all men to cheat, whereas African-American men expect all women to disrespect them. No wonder that black marriages are so fragile, with almost two thirds of black children born out of wedlock. The implication of this is that an absence of respected moral principles introduces just the sort of instability that reduces life chances. People who are not committed to being faithful are less likely to have spouses who are faithful. Similarly spouses who are unfaithful find it difficult to commit to raising their offspring together, which in turn produces a generation that has not learned to trust adult intentions. Sadly, thanks to Cooley’s looking glass self, they grow up having difficulty even trusting themselves. It is difficult for them to imagine that they more reliable than the distrustful glances of their caretakers suggest. But in not trusting themselves, they experience difficulty achieving upward mobility. Those who are not confident in their capacity to follow through on specific plans are understandably reluctant to commit to objectives never before implemented.

**Scalable Standards**

If morality is central to developing trust, it is nevertheless problematic. Before the advent of contemporary relativism, most human communities assumed that it was essential to determine what was moral. In order to make certain that everyone did the right thing, they first sought to establish what was right. Unfortunately, no absolute consensus was ever reached. There were always irreducible disputes about what was best. Most scholars assumed that these disagreements would one day be resolved by brilliant intellectual insights. They did not realize that this was impossible because it was not understood that morality is inherently conflictual. Instead of comprising an
unswerving list of categorical imperatives, morality is a process. It is a means of establishing rules and values; hence these are in constant flux. There never can be complete agreement because it is through communal disagreements that a rough consensus is forged. Morality is about scalable standards. It is about criteria that are adjusted to meet evolving social conditions and which, as a consequence, can never be fixed.

A viable morality must address numerous inconsistent aims. To begin with, in order to maintain social order, it must be simultaneously flexible and stable. As conditions change, the rules and values imposed have to be altered to match these--but they cannot be altered willy-nilly. A flexibility that is completely plastic would lose its authority. Because nothing would be constant, nothing would be capable of gaining unwavering allegiance. This is the difficulty with relativism. Any moral system that allows individuals to define right and wrong however they wish makes these definitions meaningless. Rules that can be changed whenever one desires are not rules at all. They are not even advisory guidelines, but momentary whims. A genuine rule is more stable. In order to influence behavior, it must remain in place over an extended period of time. Unless it does, it can serve neither as an internal nor external guidepost. Nor is it possible to enforce a rule to which there are no personal commitments. If people do not care about maintaining standards, it is unlikely that they will apply these when they are violated.

If, however, people hold fast to particular principles, how are these principles supposed to change so as to suit evolving circumstances? Won’t they be enforced no matter what? Conversely, if there is no there there, what is supposed to be modified?
Change implies transformation from one thing to another. Paradoxically, a complete lack of stability prevents flexibility. An infinite elasticity is a total nothingness that lacks a structure capable of adaptation. Nonetheless, there must be change when social requirements change. Rules that are not modified to fit evolving conditions are harmful, and therefore immoral. Morality must thus overcome what appears to be a contradiction. It must be both absolute and appropriate even when what is absolute differs from what is appropriate. Indeed, how can morality be concurrently flexible and stable? How can its rules and values change, but not change at one and the same time? This may sound like a mind-blowing conundrum, yet morality has to achieve both if it is to cope with emerging social challenges.

There is another inconsistency as well. We human beings do not have fully harmonious needs. What helps one person may injure another. How then are moral rules supposed to serve contradictory personal interests? Can any set of standards be so comprehensive as to include everyone all the time? Doesn’t protecting John’s property sometimes condemn Mary to owning less than he does? The Utilitarians attempted to get around this impasse by positing a need to maximize the greatest good for the greatest number. They sought the highest average happiness for everyone. But the million-dollar question, one that they failed to answer, is how does one achieve this. Some moralists (and economists) thought they could quantify happiness by calculating pleasure in terms of what were called “utiles.” Regrettably these measurements were completely fictitious. They had no substance. Yet even if they existed, the most powerful supercomputers would be insufficient to factor in every momentary delight of every human being. There is, in fact, no way to balance the competing interests of billions of people exactly. No
morality can ever be so knowledgeable about everyone’s transitory condition so as to guarantee the best deal for all. Someone, somewhere is going to feel cheated by calculations that do not come out in his or her favor. The truth is that however precisely moral judgments attempt to impose fairness, they will be disputed by those who do not get what they want. But if this is so, there can never be a moral consensus fully endorsed by everyone. In other words, absolute standards are inherently impossible.

Some postmodernists attack this conundrum head on. They claim that there is no such thing as truth, therefore universally valid moral standards are equally meaningless. Nevertheless these same post modernists are adamant moralists. Their belief in complete relativism does not stop them from being ardent defenders of the poor and downtrodden. Nor does it stop them from being scandalized by societies that engage in what they term the “genital mutilation” of females. Morality, for all of its inconsistencies, is very real and very potent. Somehow it manages to deal with a simultaneous need for flexibility and stability, as well as with a plethora of contradictory personal interests. Of course, it does not do so perfectly. Yet this is its secret. Morality operates by not finding the perfect solution. As strange as it may sound, it performs its functions by embracing imperfection. The scalable moralities in which we participate are unlike the luminous concoctions of our imaginations. Their realities are more sordid and less precise. Morality, any morality, of its very nature, is both inconsistent and ill-defined.

To begin with moral rules are inherently inexact. We may think of them as pithy little imperatives that incisively cover every contingency, but they do not even come close to achieving this ideal. Moral rules are by their very nature informal. They do not have precisely standardized formulations that mean exactly what they say. While it is
true that most people agree that telling a lie is wrong, it is not true that they always agree
as to what constitutes a lie. In the real world, not only are their disputes over whether a
particular statement conforms to the facts, but also about whether it should. There are
times when people insist that misstating the situation is not, in fact, a lie. These
declarations are frequently referred to as white lies. Sometimes they are referred to as
“tact.” There are even cases where people admit that something is a lie, but they are
equally clear that this is right anyway. To mislead the Nazis about the location of the
impending attack on Normandy is no American’s idea of an immoral act. To the
contrary, honestly projecting Eisenhower’s military intentions, and thereby endangering
the lives of thousands of troops, would be regarded as depravity. Lies, it seems, are not
always lies, or at least they are not always covered by prescriptions not to lie. Our actual
rule against lying is replete with exceptions. Lying is wrong, except when you are
protecting your wife’s feelings about putting on weight. Lying is wrong, except when
you boast a bit on your resume. The trouble is that the qualifications to the lying rule are
not explicitly enumerated. Like all moral rules, we learn them informally by observing
what is punished and what is not. Moreover, because life is maddeningly complex, no
finite set of qualifications could elicit broad acceptance. Instead, we fudge. We rely on
imprecise formulations that are adjusted to meet emerging circumstances. We sound as if
we are committed to an unchanging standard, but underneath the table allow ourselves to
stretch the rule as needed.

Not only are moral rules informal, they are created in polarized social
negotiations. These negotiations are, to be sure, similarly informal in that they do not
occur at particular times and places or according to agreed upon forms of bargaining.
People simply have disputes with other social participants from which unofficial settlements emerge. Typically, in cases where the social circumstances generate a need for revised standards, the parties align into two roughly competing alliances. One side becomes pro-abortion and the other anti-abortion and then they fight it out until a resolution is achieved. This frequently takes years, and sometimes centuries, but in the end a rough consensus emerges. So unofficial is this process that people don’t literally sign up for one side or the other, nor is there any official treaty at the conclusion of the hostilities. Nevertheless the conflict can be intense. A good guy-bad guy mentality ensues with each faction considering itself moral and the other immoral. The object is therefore to beat one’s rivals however one can. This desire tends to produce extremism.

“They,” the other side, are, after all, bad guys. As a result, each side attempts to enforce an orthodoxy upon its allies. Agreeing with one’s rivals, on the other hand, is strictly forbidden. Each side also simplifies its message to make it easier to attract the uncommitted. Its claims are stated in ambiguous terms that can be understood differently by different audiences. Ultimately both sides commit to fuzzy idealizations. Of course, these ideals are often impossible, but that does not prevent true believers from insisting they are essential. Because of this the extremists eventually lose their potency as less committed players adopt a compromise position that accommodates diverse interests. In this way, contradictory needs are represented in an accord to which many voices have contributed. The very passions of these negotiations add up to an informal calculation of communal interests that no intellectual computations can match.

Lastly, morality is negotiated and maintained in a sea of over-heated emotions. The process is not a sterile intellectual exercise. The parties do not decide which
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standards to promote by coldly determining where their interests lie. They instead react to what frustrates them by getting angry at those who stand in their way. When they negotiate, they do not point fingers of blame in a measured manner. No, they become righteously indignant. And when they enforce the rules upon which most are agreed, they do not dispassionately recite them. Instead, they irately demand their implementation. Anger is the frontline mechanism for giving moral rules their clout. It is the moral sanction of first resort. Moreover, when anger is internalized so as to personally enforce social controls, we call it guilt. When a person break rules to which he or she is individually committed, the voice of conscience intercedes with a good tongue-lashing. Other emotions too provide the energy to enforce conformity. Of special note are shame and disgust. Often people are embarrassed into complying with important standards. We ridicule them until shame impels them to desist from what they should not be doing. We may also treat rule breakers as if they were fetid objects. They are avoided in the same way we would shun ripe excrement, that is, until they come to their senses. The point of all this is that intense emotions are not quietly calculated. Feelings make instinctive estimates of what is desirable and then as instinctively impose these dictates. This means that our emotions too are inherently imprecise. They too can be potent without having to be exact.

All in all, informal rules that are informally negotiated in a polarized manner via emotionally infused demands can be both flexible and stable, both comprehensive and partial. Morality is in flux because it is a process that is intrinsically in flux. This means that it can never be completely pinned down, not that it is without influence. People may be unable to state exactly what morality is, but this does signify that they can elude its
impositions. It feels absolute to them because they are emotionally committed to some standards rather than others. And thankfully so. All societies, especially massive techno-commercial agglomerations, require socially imposed limitations. Morality, as it is, not as the philosophers and theologians have imagined it, achieves this. It creates standards that are scaled to emerging social developments; including the evolving supremacy of a professionalized middle class.

Professionalized selves must therefore understand what they are up against. If they are to participate in negotiations intended to make adjustments in historically created standards, they need to become experts in how morality operates. They cannot afford to be mired in a relativistic or an absolutist viewpoint. If they are to make demands that meet emerging needs, they have to understand that these rules are informal, socially negotiated, and emotionally enforced. To believe otherwise might induce them to insist on impossibly consistent regulations or conversely to abdicate their responsibility for demanding anything at all. Similarly if they are to be motivated to participate in the process of creating and maintaining viable moral standards, it helps to understand their own commitments. If these are overly idealistic, they may become vulnerable to a cynical detachment once a disillusionment with their normal inconsistencies sets in. If, on the other hand, they are intellectually dispassionate, they may become ineffectual bystanders to a process that will move forward irrespective of their misgivings. Self-directed participation benefits from a clear-eyed assessment of the functions and limitations of morality. In short, a professionalized orientation requires a self-motivated expertise in its operations.
Professionalized Ethics

What then are the moral standards most appropriate to an evolving technocommercial society? As our civilization has become more professionalized, the appropriate rules and values have moved from prescribing conformity to endorsing self-direction. Instead of demanding obedience to predetermined directives, they encourage individuals to make autonomous decisions, albeit ones that are in harmony with social needs. The greater the number of independent determinations required of people, the more these must be shaped by internalized principles. Self-direction, to be competent, has to be consistent with overall social requirements, but it must achieve this by consulting personal commitments. If moral standards have not been socialized to facilitate democratic, market-oriented institutions, they must be adjusted to do so. Indeed, this transformation is in the process of occurring as this is being written.

Unfortunately, what is happening is not broadly understood. The Culture Wars, although they are essentially moral negotiations, discourage an honest evaluation of the nature of politicized disputes. As an instance of polarized bargaining, it is assumed, by those in the midst of them, that the other side is simply wrong. Thus, liberals look askance at conservatives, whereas conservatives take a similar stance toward liberals. Each faction assumes that the other must be defeated so that its own conception of the truth can prevail. Liberals, in particular, in embracing relativism, declare that morality must be eliminated. They propose to abolish moral judgments and introduce universal toleration. For them, everything is equally acceptable—at least in the abstract. Yet this is to throw out the baby with the bath water. It may purge outdated rigidities, but it does so at the expense of all standards. So-called progressives do not seem to realize that self-
direction does not imply an ability to consent to any rule whatsoever; that a failure to
discriminate is tantamount to a failure to decide. Non-judgmentalism and unconditional
positive regard, if taken literally, stipulate that the good and the bad are to be treated as
equivalent. They demand a total permissiveness that, in essence, condones any evil no
matter how profound.

Self-direction, to the contrary, requires that autonomous decision makers
recognize the nature of the moral changes in which they are participating. This does not
mean, however, as some conservatives seem to believe, that traditional values have to be
embraced in every detail. An obsequious devotion to the particulars of historical
standards is just as incompetent as ethical relativism. A blind obedience to what our
ancestors believed might be appropriate to their circumstances, but not ours. Tradition is
not completely irrelevant, but neither is it completely germane. Tradition provides a
foundation upon which contemporary moral qualifications are constructed. Ethical
conventions do not become progressively more appropriate by completely eliminating all
that came before. Modified standards begin with the moral lessons we internalized as
children and which are later revised in accord with evolving social contexts. This is what
it means to make adjustments. Anyone who assumes that morality can proceed in the
manner of zero-based budgeting is vainglorious. No one is so intelligent or so well
informed as to embark on creating social standards from scratch. The past may not be
entirely congruent with the present, but many of the lessons developed by our forebears
still apply. After all, they too were human beings who needed to live in harmony with
other human beings. They too needed to figure out when to be honest and when not to
be. Who among us would suggest that the Ten Commandments are thoroughly obsolete?
Its prescriptions occasionally need to be reinterpreted to fit novel situations, but it would be as dangerous to discount them as to disregard the Golden Rule. As long as traditions are looked upon as guidelines rather than unconditional requirements, they facilitate moral adjustments.

One of the most crucial foundations inherited from the past is a need for personal discipline. As societies grew larger, our predecessors discovered, through painful trial and error, that complete spontaneity was incompatible with residing peacefully among masses of strangers. They learned that if people were to be mutually interdependent, they could not act on impulse. The notion that if it feels right, one should do it, may sound liberating, but practice demonstrates that this leads to chaos. In order to maintain the self-control to make constructive choices, it is necessary to censor natural inclinations. This forecloses countless options, but opens many more. If we look back upon the history of self-direction, it becomes plain that moral standards evolved to encourage mutually dependent autonomy. Indeed, this internalized dedication to interpersonal consideration has been hard won. The public tact we take as a given did not emerge out of nothingness. To eliminate it now in the name of individual freedom is to do away with civility. It is to endorse unnecessary provocations based upon the false premise that unmitigated spontaneity enables people to be autonomous. In this case, ignoring tradition would ignore the tools needed to engage in professionalized leadership.

What then are the central needs of a professionalized society? What sorts of moral rules and values do individuals need to adopt in order to facilitate social mobility? At least three objectives spring to mind. On a personal level, self-motivated experts need to be both competent planners and skillful social operatives. First, they have to think
ahead to organize their own activities and those of the groups they lead. They also have to be able to work in concert with an assortment of human beings. If they do not understand these others, or interact in a cooperative manner, the resulting conflicts will negate their best-laid schemes. The rules and values to which they are committed must therefore celebrate both planning and people skills. A basic rule of thumb states that you get what you honor. If people are praised for being good planners, they are more apt to become good planners. If they are congratulated for getting along with their peers, they are more likely to get along with them. Conversely, if they are never criticized for shabby thinking, they are less likely to pursue mental preparations. Likewise, if they are never condemned for a lack of civility, they will be prone to idle boasts and insensitive slights.

On a more impersonal level, self-motivated experts need to participate in setting limits that encourage interpersonal trust. They have to demand reliability of others and themselves. To assert that tolerance requires an absence of interpersonal standards is to support whatever mischief others impulsively decide to indulge. It is to remain silent when spouses betray solemn pledges of fidelity; it is to acquiesce in whatever lies politicians tell. Similarly, a failure to limit one’s impulses is to become a dangerous role partner. If one takes advantage of every opportunity that arises, regardless of the consequences, the damage done to friends and neighbors, never mind trading partners, can be irreparable. Trust is not something that happens by itself. People have to believe in it and operate in accord with it. Only when they do can they be confident in the intentions of strangers. Like self-discipline, and very much a part of it, interpersonal
trust has evolved over many eons. To abandon it for the sake of a misguided theory of toleration would be tragic.

Professionalized ethics are essential to a professionalized society. But more than this, they contribute to personal success. This is not to say that those who are the most moral are always the most successful. We have already learned that cheaters sometimes come out on top. They are what evolutionary psychologists refer to as free riders. Able to succeed because others maintain the standards that allow them to get away with their manipulations, their victories depend on the achievements of these others. They can, for instance, get away with lies because most of their contemporaries abstain from them. In essence, given the benefit of the doubt because of reputations forged by others, they slide by on imputed motives they do not share. Nevertheless, a commitment to morality does not have to be a personal liability. Players who follow the rules can be winners. Subscribing to standards that facilitate both planning and social skills, or that uphold interpersonal trust, need not handicap efforts to compete for social mobility. As long as people understand that morality is rarely rewarded for its own sake, they can calculate the consequences of their commitments vis-à-vis those who do not share them. Indeed, if they are clever, they can even allow the free riders to hang themselves with their own rope.

My brother Joel is a good example of what morality can accomplish. Joel is a straight arrow and always has been. He is honest and honorable, and is consistently considerate of other human beings. These qualities may not be associated with the typical lawyer, but they are part of his formula for success. In being self-directed, Joel has never felt compelled to manipulate his clients or the legal system. Routinely
straightforward and to the point, his clients trust him because they discover they can rely on what he says. In fact, one of Joel’s most valuable skills is explaining legal concepts in terms laypersons can grasp. Because he has no difficulty being morally transparent, he does not have to disguise his communications behind a smokescreen of technical verbiage. Nor does he have to resort to trickery in the courtroom. Joel relies on his knowledge of the law and his ability to construct logical arguments to come out ahead. As a result, he usually does and has been able to reap the rewards for doing so.

Equally straightforward, Bill Wallace at one point seemed to be undone by his allegiance to old-fashioned moral standards. Openly honest where most person might have advised evasion, he converted an apparent liability into an asset. Like my brother, Bill is a straight arrow. Candid with others, he is also candid with himself. This enabled him to make an accurate evaluation of his situation and then to act upon his conclusions. The upshot was that he was able to engage in novel forms of planning that ultimately garnered the attention of administrators in need of a system that worked. Eventually, he was also able to elicit the trust of his new colleagues. This prompted them to appoint him to positions entailing greater responsibility. Bill was not naïve. He never believed that everyone is fair. He was merely committed to being himself honorable and this paid off handsomely.

Miriam likewise was basically an honorable person. It must, however, be admitted, that in committing to a religious cult she was more than a little naïve. Nevertheless, she was able to extricate herself from this. An internal compass that pointed her toward doing the right thing in time came to her rescue. Initially fooled by promises similar to those of her childhood, when her children faced sexual exploitation
she rose to their defense. A misplaced trust in the intentions of others may have led her astray, yet a grounding in human compassion directed her out of this morass. These same humanistic commitments provided a pathway to social mobility. Miriam was able to pursue a higher education, and to do well in her studies, because she remained loyal to the truth. She did not simply accept what others told her, but evaluated the validity their assertions by her own lights. Today, she is a valued colleague at Kennesaw State University in large part because her integrity is recognized and appreciated. We, her colleagues, know that she will be conscientious and that we can depend on her to do what is right for our students.

Similar things can be said of my other colleagues. Ed and Sutham are also honest and honorable people whose upward mobility has not been deterred by their moral commitments. Ed was able to move up in a local police department because he was trusted, not in spite of it. Sutham is so group-minded that when he won our university’s prize for academic research, he donated the entire stipend to our department. In point of fact, every member of our department is trustworthy and collegial. There is not a single backstabber in the bunch. This is one of the primary reasons, that contrary to academic tradition, there has been no internecine warfare among us. It is also one of the reasons that ours has been among the fastest growing departments at Kennesaw State University. Our students appreciate what we offer, and because we collaborate effectively, what we provide is of genuine value. Not incidentally, the growth of the department redounds favorably to our personal opportunities. Yet this is not why we are individually and collectively moral. Our commitment to professionalized ethics is a cause of our success, not the other way around.
Middle Class Virtues

Finally, the time has come to be specific about middle class virtues. To what sorts of rules and values do professionalized selves need to commit? Which patterns of behavior when collectively endorsed facilitate the decentralized, self-motivated expertise that enables a techno-commercial society to function? Obviously, it no longer makes sense to promote conformity. Children who are drilled in the necessity of immediate obedience have difficulty in becoming self-directed. Nor is empty-headed spontaneity of particular value to contemporary social leaders. Doing whatever one desires is today a prescription for foolish choices. Nor is romantic idealism a good idea. Children who are inclined to indulge in incandescent dreams detached from reality may be extolled for their well-intended hopes. Adults who do the same deserve to be chided for an inability to grow up. They need to understand that Peter Pan is a fictional character. Maturity, not immaturity, warrants the esteem of professionalized selves. Experienced reliability, not eternal irresponsibility, fosters competent decision-making.

Among the qualities that consummate social planners should prize is self-discipline. Good decisions are generally beyond the reach of individuals who cannot control their impulses. Clear-headed thinking requires focused attention. An inability to concentrate either because one is easily diverted or because intense emotions cloud one’s judgment is fatal to effective action. Sticking to a particular task requires the capacity to remain mentally engaged even when attractive alternatives arise. To be organized, a person has to be able to delay gratification. He or she must be capable of completing onerous tasks despite intervening difficulties. An absence of such self-control would, under Gesellschaft conditions, dictate that little got done. Such flightiness, as even our
ancestors understood, is the mark of the grasshopper, not the ant. It may be a ticket to momentary pleasure, whereas it virtually ensures long-term failure.

Closely related to the value of self-discipline is that of merit. To plan well, a person must do more than apply effort. It is also essential to apply this effort to appropriate goals. It may sound silly, but it is nearly impossible to do well if an individual is not committed to doing well. Those who cannot distinguish between better and worse are unlikely to understand how to make improvements. Years ago this would have been regarded as a self-evident tautology. Nowadays, however, a pseudo-democratic permissiveness supports whatever goal a person happens to choose. A desire for an equality of results, where nobody excels over anyone else, insists that celebrating some performances over others is tantamount to oppression. Everyone is supposed to be a winner, which implies that no deed can be considered superior to any other. This philosophy, needless to say, promotes mediocrity. It sponsors Little League games where no one keeps score. At the conclusion of such contests, there may be no losers, but, by the same token, few strive to win. In a community where everything is equally meritorious, the motivation to seek advances is lacking.

Those who aim to do better must likewise have foresight. If they cannot make accurate projections into the future, their plans are apt to be solipsistic. The designs they put forward become arbitrary daydreams that have nothing to do with what is possible. Some people believe that good intensions alone mark them out as virtuous. They imagine that a desire to do noble deeds is the same as being noble. What they leave out of their reasoning is that actions have consequences. If what someone wants produces unfortunate results, then it scarcely matters if his or her goals were honorable. Mistakes,
to be sure, are unavoidable, but if these occur because a person did not consider the likely outcomes, he or she is blameworthy. Foresight is not an optional extravagance for effective planners. It is at the core of what they do. Thinking ahead must therefore be an activity in which they take pride. So too ought a dedication to progress. Thinking ahead is not enough if a person is arranging for fiascos. Competent planners require the optimism to believe that their projects will lead to advancements. A conviction that things can, and should, improve is one of the great achievements of modernity. This has provided people with the hope to keep forging ahead. Nowadays, they not only expect change to be for the better; they anticipate partaking in them.

Obviously, first-rate planning also depends on a large store of knowledge. Those who do not understand their environment or the causal connections between events are unlikely to put the pieces together in ways that make sense. Would-be social leaders must, for that reason, prize education. A professionalized self also requires curiosity. Lifelong learning is more apt to occur when an internalized inquisitiveness prompts a search for new information. To be satisfied with what one already knows is to be trapped in the present. Beyond this, expert planners need to value creativity. Putting ideas together in novel ways makes it possible to achieve goals that have never before been conceived. In thinking what has not previously been entertained, pristine horizons come into view. Unexpected methods for satisfying human needs spring to life, with the consequence, that progress is promoted. Next, techno-commercial planners benefit from being cosmopolitan. The broader their purview, the greater the number of options they can contemplate. If they are able to see beyond the parochial boundaries that their young selves, their knowledge, their curiosity, and their creativity are all enhanced. An
On a social level, professionalized selves ought to be committed to democratic processes. There is a reason that middle class, techno-commercial societies have developed into democracies. A world as complex as our own cannot function effectively without the voluntary inputs of millions of contributors. But if these players are to be motivated to do their best, their desires have to be factored into the decisions. Would-be leaders must, therefore, honor popular desires. They have to believe in the rights and dignity of their fellow citizens, even when these others are not in leadership positions. Middle class professionals have to listen to what their peers say. They must also be committed to promoting common interests. This, however, does not imply that contemporary leaders have to believe in total equality. An equality of rights is one thing; an equality of results is quite another. Because merit is routinely trampled upon when outcomes are coercively balanced, it is an equality before the law and an equality of opportunity, not an equivalence in property ownership or social power, that needs to be sought. The goal is not sameness, but personal freedom. Professionalized selves, whatever their status, require the liberty to pursue their dreams. They have to be allowed room to choose that which meets their needs—that is, as long as this does not interfere with the needs of others. Would-be leaders must not abuse their power by solely imposing the outcomes they prefer. Democratic attitudes have to be consistent with allowing others to exercise as much control over their personal lives as is feasible. Democracy is about a decentralization of power. Professionalized leaders must be aware of this and dedicated to supporting it.
In a world dependent on decentralized power, it is likewise necessary to deal with challenges emanating from multiple directions. In a society where more people are free to pursue social mobility, they are also free to contest the advantages of their rivals. This makes conflict endemic and requires potential winners to defend their turf. Social success is thus contingent on “people-courage.” Social leaders must not only possess the daring to stand their ground, and the boldness to initiate risky expeditions toward the top, they have to rejoice in the audacity of doing so. Being able to deal with others face-to-face without running away from tests of strength is something that deserves to be admired. This faculty, not an ability to climb mountains, is what separates the successful from the unsuccessful. Obviously the sort of courage required is related to emotional maturity. Learning to endure strong emotions, in this case regarding interpersonal fears, enables individuals to assess specific dangers and respond appropriately. It helps them define their strengths relative to others and, therefore, to determine their status in comparison with them. People-courage, as opposed to, let us say, athletic prowess, is what creates authentic middle class winners.

Individuals who possess this sort of bravery are also likely to exhibit another important social skill. Successful members of the middle class are inclined to value social tolerance. While they do not indiscriminately accept whatever comes along, they subscribe to a moral duty to appreciate individual differences. Instead of being frightened by the unfamiliar, they investigate personal discrepancies and independently evaluate what they find. Rather than judge others by surface features, they take the time to discover the particulars of those with whom they are dealing before reaching a verdict. More than this, they are prepared to allow others to be themselves. They not only permit
them to be different; they take pleasure in the joys these others experience in being
different. If, of course, what is dissimilar turns out to be anti-democratic, they are apt to
be less tolerant. Terrorism, however much the terrorists believe in their mission, will not
be passively endured. It must be understood that tolerance does not imply a suicide pact.
It does not preclude making distinctions where distinctions are essential.

Another middle class social virtue is a belief in so-called “family values.”
Professionalized selves must be committed to supporting voluntary intimacy between
consulting adults. In this, they encourage the emotional havens that further the personal
valor needed to cope with techno-commercial demands. This means that the concept of
interpersonal fidelity must be taken seriously. When heterosexual intimates pledge each
other their troth, they, and their friends and neighbors, ought to hold them to this
undertaking. Doing so not only benefits a majority of couples, it is crucial to providing
security for their children. The socialization of confident, self-directed youngsters
depends on it. If adults decide to engage in procreation, they assume an obligation to
provide for the vulnerable offspring they bring into the world. Thus, before they take on
this responsibility, they must be internally motivated, and emotionally prepared, to raise
children in a loving environment. Undue selfishness, as manifested in an inability to
negotiate evenhanded social compacts, is both mean spirited and unjust.

On a broader level, among the virtues that trustworthy middle class leaders need
to celebrate is personal responsibility. If they are to maintain the confidence of others,
they have to follow through on their commitments. When they are delegated to perform a
task, they must not only perform it expertly; they must do so in a manner that considers
requirements beyond their own. The goal of virtuous leaders should not merely be to get
ahead, but also to enable their dependents to get ahead. This entails a cognizance of the needs of others, a dedication to achieving these, and the preparedness to accept the blame when things go wrong. Responsible leaders both exert an effort to make good decisions and possess the emotional strength to bear up under social pressures. They are competent role-takers who are capable of empathy and of perceiving events from multiple perspectives. Trustworthy, in part, because they are prepared to shoulder the burden of failure, they will admit their contributions to disappointing results. Although they are committed to getting things right, they do not run away when they go wrong. This makes it possible for others to rely on them. They know responsible leaders will be there when the going gets rough.

Socially skilled leaders also tend to value honesty. If they are not always completely truthful, they nevertheless attempt to be honest when they can. First, they seek to be honest with themselves. They understand that when they fool themselves, they are apt to be led astray in their dealings with others. Second, they are aware that casual deceit sours interpersonal relationships. Others eventually become wary of what they say with the consequence that they are not trusted. Truthfulness, as already noted, is not absolute. There are times when the facts ought to be disguised, but this must be done with care. In general, professionalized selves are suspicious of casual lies. This applies both to their public and private lives. Whether as business leaders, politicians, lovers, or parents, they admire honesty. They covet a reputation for integrity and are distressed when others violate its standards.

Lastly, professionalized selves must be fair. They must defend their own rights, but not at the expense of others. Yes, they want to come out ahead, they should also
value social balance. A middle class society must strive for justice. Its moral rules have
to apply to everyone. Some may succeed better than others, but the playing field should
nevertheless be even. Still, fairness and equality are not the same. The first applies to a
universality of opportunity, whereas the second stipulates the outcomes. It is, however,
opportunities that matter more. People must believe they have a chance or they will not
accord this to others. Complete equality, in contrast, prevents initiative. It punishes
people for their abilities.

If all of this sounds familiar—perhaps even a bit trite—it is because these
standards have been evolving over the course of many centuries and sometimes
millenia. As participants in an on-going Middle Class Revolution, we have all been
exposed to demands to honor some, if not all, of these. Sometimes we merely go through
the motions because for many of us they have become empty rituals. We shrug our
shoulders and wonder why we should be fools for a naïve moralism. Nevertheless, moral
rules need to be taken seriously. Our personal and social successes depend on it. We
cannot become competently self-directed contributors to a decentralized techno-
commercial society without participating in a larger community that is committed to
fairness and decency. We cannot become professionalized selves who dependably
collaborate with other professionalized selves if these others are unprepared to
collaborate with us. Shared standards are the foundation of a cooperative social life, and
hence of our personal security and interpersonal success.
About Melvyn L. Fein

Melvyn L. Fein, Ph.D. is Professor of Sociology at Kennesaw State University. He is a certified clinical sociologist who holds his doctorate in sociology from the City University of New York. After over twenty years of clinical practice specializing in helping individuals overcome their personal problems, he is now concentrating on the study of sociological theory and the sociology of morality. Among his recent books are The Great Middle Class Revolution and Peoplization: An Introduction to Social Life. Dr. Fein is also editor of The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology.